

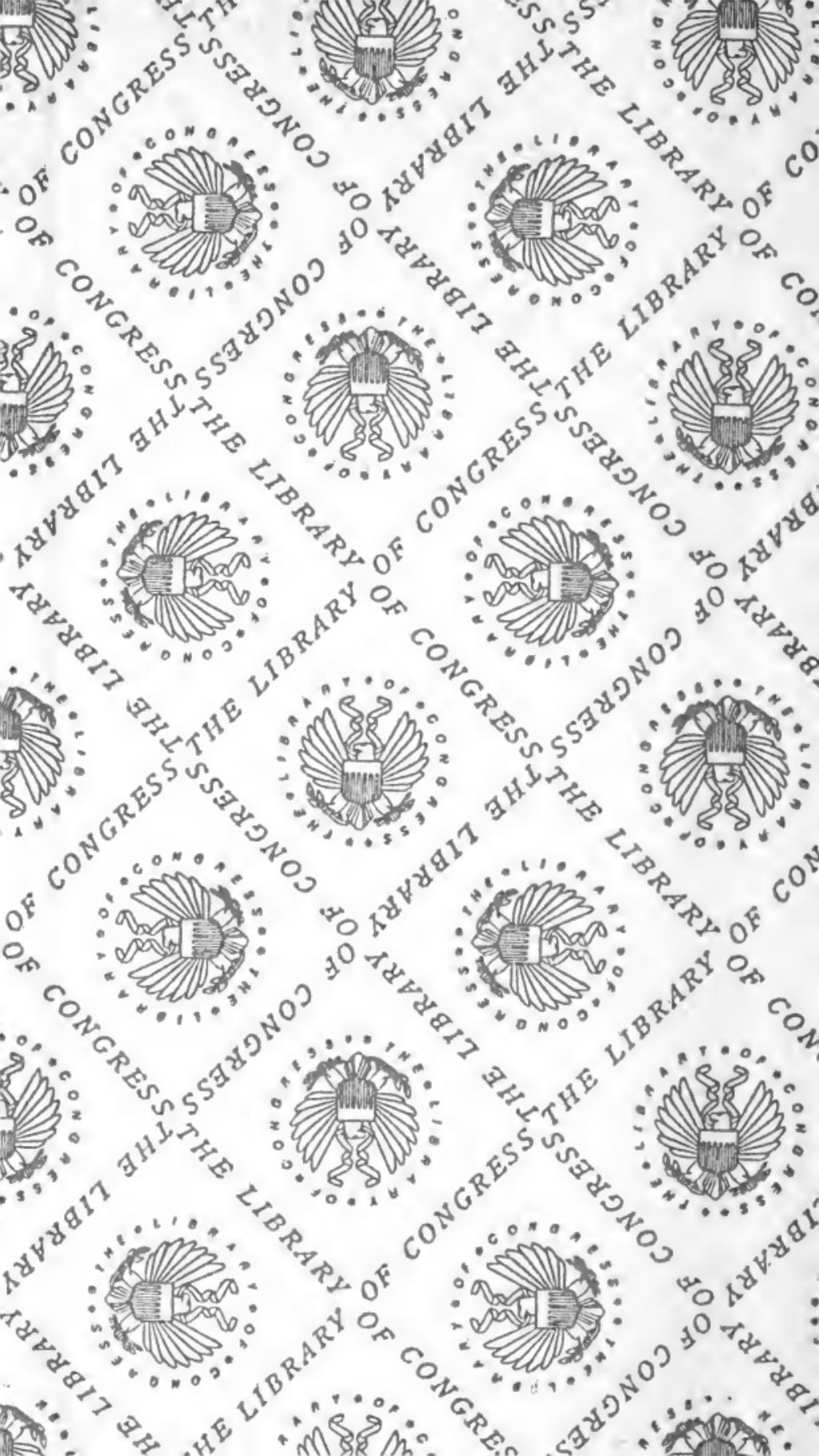
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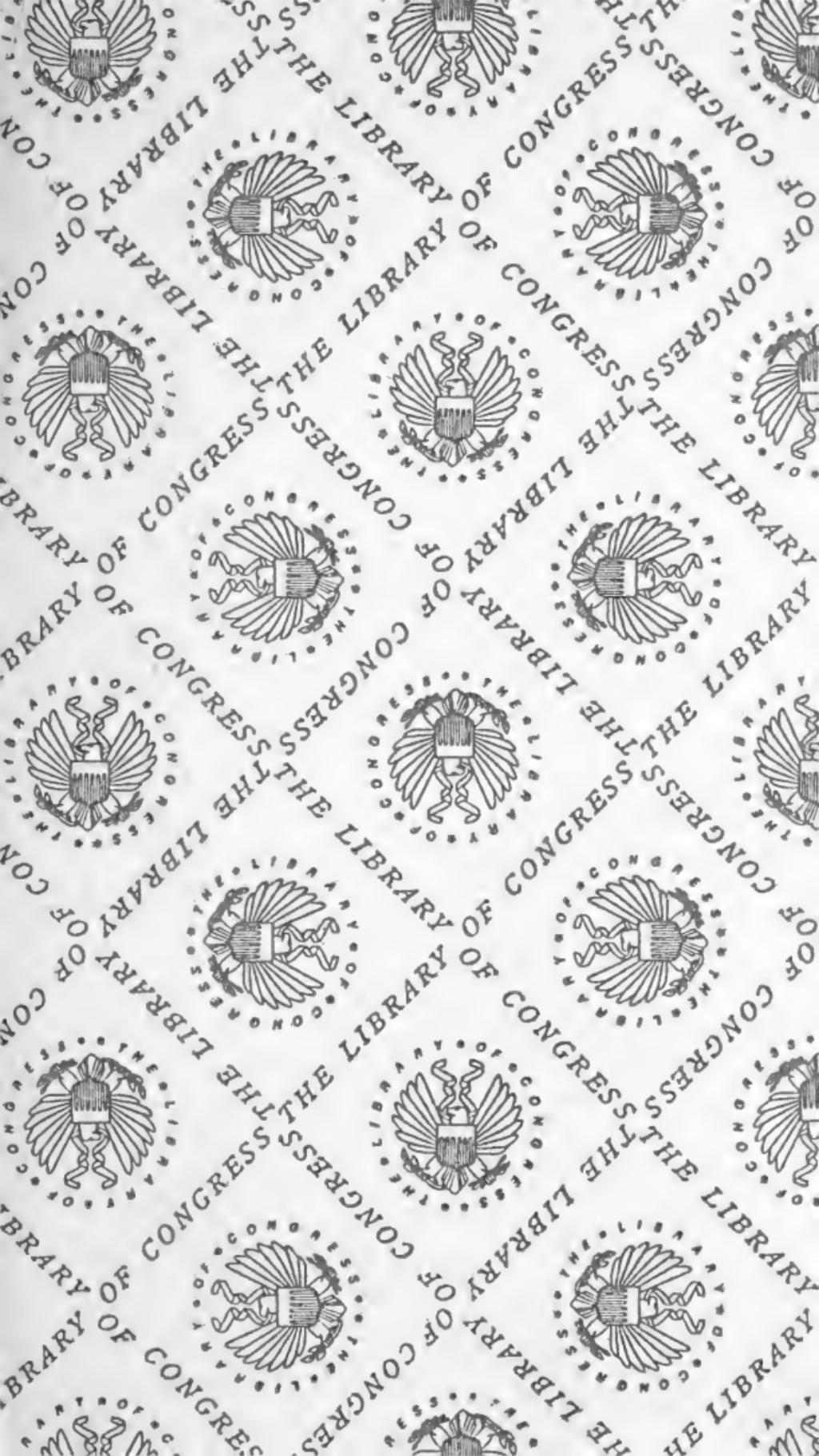
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E S T H E R,

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A SACRED DRAMA:

WITH

J U D I T H,

A POEM.

BY MRS. E. L. CUSHING.



BOSTON:
PUBLISHED BY JOSEPH DOWE,
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TO

MRS. HENRY CABOT,

THIS LITTLE VOLUME,

WHICH OWES ITS PRESENT APPEARANCE TO HER
FRIENDLY ZEAL AND EXERTIONS,

Is Inscribed,

WITH SENTIMENTS OF GRATEFUL AND AFFEC-
TIONATE REGARD,

BY

THE AUTHOR.



P R E F A C E.

THE following Drama appeared two years since, in several successive numbers of the "Lady's Book;" and the earnest solicitations of friends, who have perhaps judged it with too much partiality, joined to some minor considerations, have induced the author again to submit it to the ordeal of public criticism,— which she does with much timidity, and many fears lest it should be found unable to abide that fiery trial. The Poem, which accompanies it, has likewise been already published. But as the groundwork, both of that and of the Drama, was derived from the same sacred volume, it is subjoined, rather, as having on that account been deemed a fitting companion for the former, than because it is thought to possess any extraordinary merit to recommend it to the notice of the reader.

May, 1840.

CHARACTERS.

AHASUERUS, *King of Persia.*
HAMAN, *his chief favorite.*
MEMUCAN,
MARSENA,
ADMATHA, } *Princes of Persia.*
HARBONA,
ZETHAR, } *High Chamberlains.*
HATACH,
ÆRATHEUS,
HEGAI, } *Officers of the Palace.*
COURTIERS, NOBLES, &c.
VASHTI, *Queen of Persia.*
ZERESH, *Wife of Haman.*

JEWS.

MORDECAI, *a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin.*
JOATHAM, *a Jewish Rabbi.*
AZOR, *a kinsman of Mordecai.*
ESTHER, *a kinswoman and adopted daughter of Mordecai.*
ATTENDANTS.

Scene—in the City and Palace of Shushan.

ESTHER.

ACT I.

SCENE I.—*A Pavilion in the court of the palace. Ahasuerus sitting at the banquet, surrounded by the princes and nobles of his empire.*

Ahasuerus. Princes and nobles, hail! assembled powers

Of fertile Media, and of Persia fair,
Again I greet you with a sovereign's love,
And bid you welcome to my palace courts.
One hundred days and fourscore have passed on,
With swift and noiseless wing, since here ye came,
And to your wondering eyes have been revealed
Our kingdom's wealth, our splendor, power, and
might!

No idle boast, no glittering pageantry,
To cheat the dazzled sight have we displayed;
But pomp, and wealth, and majesty, at which
Earth's kings, ay, e'en its proudest ones, might bow
The knee, and sicken with pale envy.

(All shout.) Hail, mighty king! Long live our
sovereign lord!

Ahasuerus (bows his head). Receive a monarch's
thanks, and grant him yet

For one brief moment's space your patient ear.—
Swift as an arrow's flight, seven days have sped,
Since with gay hearts, unscathed by care's rude hand,
Or grief's corrosive touch, ye here have sat

Around our banquet board, and shared with us
 Our royal dainties ; and from sculptured bowls
 Of precious ore, have quaffed delicious wines,
 Such wines as only grace a monarch's feast.
 With wondering eyes ye have admired our pomp,
 Have gazed enraptured on this princely pile,
 The boast of Shushan,—with its marble courts,
 Its purple hangings, wove in Tyrian looms
 And looped with cords of gold, that sweep their folds,
 With gorgeous grace around the marble plinths
 That base the columns fair ; thence falling rich
 O'er the bright pavement, ivory inlaid
 With the blue sapphire, and the ruby's stone,
 The changeful opal, purple amethyst,
 And every colored gem of beauty rare,
 Gathered from distant Ind, and hither brought
 To shed their radiance o'er our regal courts !

Memucan (aside to Admatha). Look thou, Admatha,
 merry is his heart

With the delicious juice of the crushed grapes !
 Mark how it sparkles in his princely eye,
 And flushes on his cheek ! And list ! Again
 The monarch speaks. What meaning in his look !
 Some rare proposal dances in his smile,
 Some act of grace about to be divulged,
 Which to our revels shall bring added zest.

Ahasuerus. Princes, and peers who circle round our
 throne,

And bask beneath the sunshine of our smile,
 Ye deem your monarch blessed because his board
 Groans beneath dainty cates and rosy wines,
 While servile slaves adoring kiss the ground
 Pressed by his foot, and million voices hail
 Him first, him greatest, 'mong earth's greatest ones.
 But vain this pomp ! the heart rejects it all,
 And asks for nobler joys to fill its void.

My wide command, my gorgeous palaces
 Enriched with gems and gold, my spacious courts
 Guarded by sculptured forms unique and rare,
 And cooled by gushing founts, whose feathery spray
 Descends on glowing beds of perfumed flowers,
 That scent the rosy air with incense sweet,—

These all were vain, unworthy of a thought,
 Without the favor of the mighty gods,
 Without the love of her who shares my throne,
 And gilds it with the lustre of her charms !

(All.) Long live great Vashti ! Persia's beauteous queen !

Ahasuerus. My heart responds with fervor to that shout,

And, to reward your loyalty and love,
 This moment will I summon to our feast,
 My peerless queen. Yes, valiant peers, princes,
 And subjects all, you shall behold her charms,
 Shall gaze with wonder on that priceless gem,
 That lends its glory to my kingly crown,

And then confess how the great gods have blessed.

Harbona, speed thee quick with my commands

Straight to thy royal mistress ; and declare

My sovereign will, that hither she resort,

Without delay, arrayed in royal state,

With jeweled crown decking her lovely brow,

All as beseems her rank and bearing high.

And farther still,—bid her appear unveiled.

I would the envious shade which shrouds her face,

Dimming its beauty rare, were thrown aside,

So shall each eye gaze with unchecked delight

On Persia's radiant queen.

Harbona (prostrates himself before the king).

Pardon, great king, the boldness of thy slave,
 But well thou knowest the queen a banquet holds
 E'en at this hour, within the palace walls,
 Where all the ladies of thy royal house
 Sit with her at the feast—and much I fear,
 She my request will spurn, nor deign to come
 And stand unveiled before thy princely guests.

Ahasuerus. Harbona, rise ! I freely pardon thee,
 Though of thy monarch's absolute command
 Thou dost imply a doubt. Speed at my word,
 Nor fear the queen's rebuke. Her king commands,
 And even she, the loved and cherished one,
 First in my kingdom, dearest to my heart,
 Will never venture to gainsay the will
 Of him who reigns sovereign unlimited,

From fertile India's green and palmy vales,
To distant Ethiopia's arid wastes.
Depart in peace, no longer make delay.
Go thou, and Zethar bear thee company—
We are impatient for thy quick return.

Harbona. Most gracious king, we hasten to obey !

(*Going—speaks aside to Zethar.*)

Come, Zethar, to our task,—but, gracious heaven !
As soon wilt thou send down thy starry host
To grace this gorgeous banquet, as the queen,
The proud and scornful queen, with willing feet,
Haste at the bidding of her royal lord,
To swell the triumph of his earth-born pride.

[*Exeunt Chamberlains.*

SCENE II.—*An apartment in the Palace.—Vashti and the ladies seated at the banquet.*

[*Enter Hatch.*]

Hatch. Most gracious queen, I come with tidings strange
To greet thine ear. The king's high chamberlains,
Sent at their lord's command, now wait without,
To bear thee hence, e'en to the banquet hall,
Where with his valiant peers, the monarch feasts.
At first I did refuse their suit to press,
But earnest were they, not to be denied ;
And I perforce have sought thee, to declare
The errand which they bring.

[*The Queen rises in anger and astonishment from her seat and speaks.*]

Vashti. Slave ! darest thou bear unto thy mistress' ear
Such words as these ! Know thou dost peril life,
To come before me with such message bold ;
Or art thou mad ? Methinks some sorcerer,
Some spirit dark and full of wicked wiles
Has looked upon thee with an evil eye,
And seared thy maddening brain. Else whence these words ?

These ravings rather of a maniac mind,—
Speak quick, and end my wonder.

Hatach. Great queen, forgive the humblest of thy slaves,

By whom the pangs of death were far less feared,
Than angry word or darkening frown of thine.
I have but told the message of my king
Brought hither by his servants, who now wait
In anxious hope an audience to obtain
Of thee, their queen, touching their lord's behest.

Vashti. Most strange ! Most wonderful !
I comprehend it not ! I dream, methinks !
Go, Hatach, summon quick the chamberlains,
And I will meet them in the mirrored hall,
Where the bright fountain with its lulling sound
May cool my fevered blood. [Exit *Hatach*.]

Unto the banquet hall, he said,
Ye gods, forbid it ! shame and pride forbid !
A woman's shame ! a woman's queenly pride !
A queen, said I ? Ay ; yes, by right of birth,
Of high, unmixed descent,—for the same tide,
The rich and crimson tide of royal blood,
Which warmed the heart of Cyrus, my great sire,
Flows also through my veins, a taintless stream,
Pure as its fount,—and never shall his shade,
Where high enthroned in glorious heaven it sits,
Stooping to gaze from his abode of bliss
On the low scenes of earth, have cause to mourn
That Vashti was his daughter. [Exit Queen.]

SCENE III.—*A marble hall, lined with mirrors.—A fountain playing in the centre.—Vashti reclining on a pile of cushions,—behind her stand two female attendants.—Harbona and Zethar enter, conducted by Hatach, and prostrate themselves before the queen.*

Vashti. Rise, lords ! your homage vain I ask not now,—

But wait impatient, while you brief disclose
The message which you bring ; for rumor strange
Has falsified, fain would I so believe,
Its purport to my ear.

Harbona. Beauteous and sovereign queen, the words
we bear,

Are those of our dread lord, and we his slaves
Do but his bidding to repeat them here,
Else were our lives a forfeit to his wrath.

Vashti. Speak on!

My heart is schooled to hear you to an end
With passionless serenity. Say on,—
But let me warn you of the thunder-burst
That follows oft a calm.

Harbona. Most mighty queen, we are but passive
slaves;

Powerless to purge offence from out our task,—
We are the guiltless instruments of wrong,
If wrong there be, and deprecate thy wrath
With earnest prayer. Full well, great queen, thou
knowest

In Shushan's palace courts a feast is held,
Where all the assembled powers of this wide realm
Sit with our monarch at his banquet board,
While he displays his majesty and might.
His kingdom's wealth, his pomp, and sovereign state,
To their admiring eyes,— and still ascends,
From every echoing lip, the loud acclaim
That speaks a nation's homage and delight.
Yet to complete their wonder and surprise,
And as a guerdon for their loyal love,
He fain would show them what he prizes most,
Yea, far above all gifts the gods bestow,
His peerless queen,— the mistress of his heart,
The ruling star that guides his destiny.

And us he sends, imploring thee to come
Wearing the golden crown, and purple robe,
And gemmed thy beauteous hair with queenly pride,
That every eye, which marvels at his pomp,
May view the treasure richer far than all,
And own him crowned with heaven's "peculiar love,"
Bless'd with a queen so virtuous, bright, and fair.
Most gracious lady, thus thy lord entreats,
And farther prays that thou wilt cast aside
The envious veil which o'er thy beauty hangs,
That all unshadowed, in excess of light,

Thy dazzling charms may burst upon their eyes.
We have fulfilled our task. Oh, queen, forgive,
If we offence have wrought, by words not ours.

Vashti. True, you are instruments, but daring ones,
To tempt me in this sort. Yet, you I pardon,—
Scorn and wrath for him who sends me scorn,
And dare insult the partner of his throne
With words like these. Preposterous request!
I did not dream that one on earth there lived,
Who held his safety at so light a price,
As thus to offer insult to my name!
And can he think Vashti will heed *his* word,
Who reckless of her fame, has summoned her
To stand unveil'd before a gaping crowd
Heated with wine, and let their jests profane
Pollute her ear ne'er jarred by vulgar sound?
No, Persia's queen stoops not to such disgrace!
Depart, my lords, and bear my answer back,—
Go, tell your king, that Vashti did not wed
To swell the pomp and triumph of her lord;
She has a spirit, that will not be chain'd
E'en to the chariot-wheels of Persia's king,
All-powerful as he is. Her free-born soul
Was formed for rule,—great Cyrus was her sire,
And no low thought, no act unworthy him,
Shall sully her proud name!

Harbona. Alas! great queen, forego these bitter
taunts,—

I fear to bear them to my angry lord,
They 'll chafe him sore. Hast thou no gentle word
To soften thy reply?—we humbly pray
That for thy servants' sake thou wouldest not stir
With scornful word the monarch's slumbering wrath.

Vashti. On me 't will fall, and know, I fear it not,
I would he should be chafed—so now depart,—
I am in haste,—the untasted banquet waits,
For thou, ill-omened, didst disturb our feast.
Therefore, begone,—and say I will not come.
The ruddy nectar of the purple grape
Has sent its fumes into thy monarch's head,
And when soft sleep has cooled its feverish heat,
He will rejoice that his command was spurned,

Unworthy him, and insolent to me.
 Go, for I fear him not, nor hast thou cause.
 Farewell, my lords, nor do your queen the wrong,
 Ever again, on such an errand bent,
 To seek her presence ; lest some wo befall,
 More mighty than you dread from him you serve.

[*Exeunt Lords.*

SCENE IV.—*An apartment in the palace. Ahasuerus, Memucan, Marsena, and other princes and nobles.*

Ahasuerus. Gods ! do I live to hear it ?
 Vashti insults her lord ! sets him at naught,
 And beards him publicly with woman's scorn !
 Eternal gods ! hurl down your thunderbolts,
 And with your fiercest lightnings smite me low
 If with a coward heart I shrink from aught
 Which strict and awful justice may demand !
 Princes and peers, who stand around the throne,
 I ask your counsel in this dark affair,—
 Our power shall not be braved, our will despised,
 And yet the offender pass unheeded by.
 Though 't is our queen, she meets with her deserts ;
 Not e'en our love shall shield her from reproach
 And condign punishment. Speak, then, my lords,
 Your counsel I demand.

Memucan. As thou, great king, commandest, so we speak,
 Fearless and free, as to a monarch just ;
 For not alone her king and sovereign lord
 Has Vashti wronged, dishonored, and despised,
 But all who sat with him around his board,—
 Nay, all his peopled provinces shall groan,
 If her rebellious act unpunished goes.
 Far, far abroad, its evil fame shall spread,
 Till to the utmost verge of thy broad realm,
 It shall be told by peasant, lord, and slave ;—
 The shameful tale, which all might blush to hear,
 Shall be familiar as a household word,
 And rouse up idle women, weak, and vain,
 To grasp at rule, to spurn their wedded laws,

And brave defiance to their rightful lords.

Marsena (aside to Admatha). Right eloquent he is in this good cause,

Nor wonder I to hear his earnest words,
For well I ween, he has a shrew at home,
A tameless shrew, that love nor fear can rule.

Ahasuerus. 'T is true, alas ! too true !

Say what thou wilt, and I shall have it done.

'T is easier far to lop a limb diseased
Than leave it to infect the neighboring trunk
With slow decay. And for the general good,
I will be first to throw afar a dear
But poisonous ill.

Memucan. Oh, king ! most wise art thou, and ever just,

And ever ready, for thy subjects' weal,
To sacrifice thyself. Let then, my lord
(Since it doth please him bid his servants speak)
Send forth his high command, touching the queen ;
That she be banished from his heart and throne,
Since she has forfeited his royal grace,
And openly rebelled against his power.
Then let another fair and bright as she
Possess her lost estate, and share thy throne,
The partner of thy kingdom and thy love.
Still may thy servant speak !—Let this decree,
Be written in our law, that changeless law,
Which ever stands immutable and firm.
Thus may it best be known throughout the land,
Teaching rebellious wives 't were wise to give
Honor where honor 's due, and meek submission
To their wedded lords.

Ahasuerus. It shall be done.

This hour shall see me sign her banishment,
And she shall know I will be king indeed.
This sceptre, and this crown of sovereignty,
The symbols of my power, shall not adorn
A royal shade, who fears or knows not how
Like a true king to exercise command.
Through all my hundred provinces send forth
This just decree, touching our banished queen.
In every varied tongue spoke in our realm,

Let it be written fair, that all may read,
And with my signet seal. So be it known ;
Such is our royal pleasure and command.

[Exit.]

SCENE V.—*An apartment in the palace. The king and Memucan.*

Memucan. I did but do thy bidding, gracious king,
When with despatch I sent forth the decree
Of Vashti's banishment.

Ahasuerus. Ay, with most cruel haste,
Thou didst the deed. Thou fearedst lest I should
change;

Lest in a cooler hour, my angry mood
Should pass, and love return. Full well thou knowest
That the inebriate wine had fired my blood,
And paralyzed my brain,—else had thy words
Fallen powerless to the ground, as they deserved ;
Thou didst not well to chafe me in such sort.
Because at home thou hast an angry wife,
Thou fain wouldest wreak the wrongs which she in-
flicts,

On all of woman-kind. Weak that I was,
To list thy cunning arts ;—they 've wrought me wo,
And desolation dire. My sun has set,
My bright resplendent sun, that shed its rays
Benignant o'er my path, and lighted up
My world with love, and hope, and ecstasy.—
But I will see her yet,—once more behold
Those peerless charms I have so long adored,
And at her feet confess my sin and grief.
Go, and bid Hatach warn her I approach,—
Nay, cease thy wiles, 't is vain for thee to speak,—
I am resolved to win her back again,
If so the gods permit.

Memucan. Great king, forbear thy wrath !
She has departed, whither none can tell.
Soon as she learned thy will, with fierce disdain,
And brow of angry pride, she called her slaves,
And bid them quick prepare to follow her.

None traced her steps, nor marked the course she took,
 But ere o'er yonder distant mountains broke
 The orient dawn, she with her maiden train
 Had passed the city gates.

Ahasuerus. Gone forth to exile, lonely and uncheered!

Ye gods, forgive my sin ! But as for thee,
 False, cruel man ! 't is thou hast wrought this deed,
 And wrought it with a calm demoniac joy,
 As now thou break'st these tidings to my ear.
 Yea, thou dost revel in thy monarch's wo,—
 I see it in thy eye, and hear it breathed
 In the low accents of thy treacherous voice.
 Go,—rid me of thy presence, which I loathe—
 Since thou art false, there's none whom I may trust.

Memucan. (*falling at his feet*). My lord ! my king !
 Kill not thy slave with words

Unkind as these,—words which he ill deserves.
 Reflect one instant, ere thou dost pronounce
 Such sentence harsh,—and if thou canst recall
 One act disloyal, or one treacherous deed,
 That ever blackened Memucan's fair fame,
 Then, and then only will he bow resigned
 To thy displeasure stern, and deem it just.

Ahasuerus. Nay, rise my lord,
 I feel I am unjust. Despair and wo
 Are busy at my heart, to turn its blood
 To gall. Thou hast been ever true ; most true
 And firm, till now, and zealous to perform
 My slightest wish. 'T is pity that thy zeal
 Should e'er o'erstep thy love. Else might the hand,
 Which erst has poured the balm of woman's love
 Into my thirsting soul, still minister
 To all its wants, and soothe my ruffled mood,
 When chafed by cares that often line the crown,
 Gorgeous with gems and gold.

Memucan. Thy pardon, gracious king ;
 If I have erred, 't was through desire to serve
 Thy righteous cause, and vindicate thy fame,—
 And not to gratify one selfish thought.
 And yet I pray thee, mourn no more for her
 Who spurned thy love, and with such rash disdain

Defied the power she was most bound to obey.
 All praise the act which drove the aggressor forth,
 And call it wise, expedient, and most just.
 Then in a nation's loud approving voice
 Find comfort for thy loss, and let my lord,
 Take to his bosom soon another queen,
 Whose beauty shall delight, whose gentler soul
 Shall soothe his cares and hush his vain regrets.

Ahasuerus. Too well thou knowest, when first I
 thought to wed,
 Of all that sought my love, 't was she alone
 Who fixed my wandering heart. Now she has gone !
 And where upon the habitable earth
 Dwells there another who can touch my soul,
 And charm it in such wise as she has done ?

Memucan. I know not where, but sure one may be
 found,—
 'T were strange, indeed, if 'mong those radiant forms
 That bloom throughout our land, in pillared hall,
 Or in low dwellings by the fountain's side,
 Where clustering roses bloom, less bright than they,
 And odorous spices breathe, 't were strange, methinks,
 Were there not one could charm thy royal eye,
 One fair and graceful as thy banished queen,
 Though she, indeed, was beautiful as thought.
 Let then my king, if it shall please his grace,
 Send forth his servants throughout all his realm,
 Servants well skilled in choice of female charms,
 And from each vale and city of the land,
 Far as thy sceptre sways, let those bright maids,
 Whom the high gods have blessed with rarest gifts,
 Be gathered to the courts of Shushan fair,
 Where when the time allotted by our law
 For preparation meet, in the free use
 Of fragrant baths and purifying odors,
 Shall have passed, each shall be brought to thee,
 That thou mayest choose from out the assembled
 throng,
 The maiden fair who pleases most thine eye,
 And seems by nature formed to fill the place
 Once graced by fallen Vashti.

Ahasuerus. Full well thy thought doth please,

And I will have it so. Quick, send thou forth
 Most trusty ministers, as thou hast said ;
 And bid them cull forthwith the fairest maids,
 Where'er they may be found,—and bid Hegai
 Straight prepare all things for their reception,
 Garments, and odors, and apartments rich,
 Within the palace walls.

Memucan. Swift I depart thy message to fulfil,—
 And may a balm be found ere long, my king,
 A sovereign balm, to heal thy wounded heart.

[*Exit Memucan.*]

SCENE VI.—*The city of Shushan. The court of an eastern house, filled with shrubs and flowers. A fountain in the centre; beside which sits Esther, a Jewish maiden. A few paces from her stands a youth with a bow in his hand, from which he has just shot upward an arrow. Suddenly he approaches the maiden, and addresses her.*

Boy. Sweet cousin, didst thou mark my arrow's flight,
 As with a swift and most unerring aim,
 It parted from the string, cleft the blue air,
 And smote the topmost twig of yon dark fir,
 Bringing it down from its aspiring height
 To the bare earth—a trophy of my skill?

Esther. I marked it well, and thought 't were pity
 sure
 In wanton play to smite so proud a thing,
 That stood rejoicing in its airy height,
 Giving its resinous odors to the breeze,
 And quaffing from the sun's resplendent urn,
 Full draughts of light and life ; while heaven's own
 dews
 Nurtured its growing beauty day by day,
 Till it became of yon majestic tree
 The very topmost glory and delight,
 The diadem that lent it regal grace,—
 And thou hast wrought its fall—in idle sport,
 Hast made that worthless, which—

Boy. Nay, peace, fair coz,—thy moral is too long,

And passing grave to come from ruby lips,
 That shame the damask of the blushing rose.
 I thought to win a smile for this myfeat,
 And not provoke a priestly homily.
 Thou bad'st me never smite a living thing,—
 Else I'd have brought yon bird that seems a speck
 Far in the azure vault, low at thy feet,
 A prouder trophy of my archery
 Than this poor tuft of leaves.

Esther. Then, Azor, had we been at deadly feud,—
 For well thou know'st I shudder to see flow
 From aught that breathes the crimson tide of life.

Boy. Thou art a very woman in thy mood
 I know full well, and lov'st thy odorous bowers,
 Thy sparkling founts, music and tales of old,
 And moonlit colonnades, and maiden's glee,
 Better than bolder scenes, and stirring deeds
 That make the pulses bound, and the young blood
 Leap like a torrent through the burning veins,
 In a wild ecstasy of joy and bliss!

Esther. Indeed, indeed, thou 'rt right. These gentle spells

Are flowery links that bind the heart to home,
 And with a witchery that naught can break,
 Enchain the young affections. Round life's morn
 They cast a gentle radiance, which no shade
 Can e'er eclipse. What say the aged? After years
 May bring new scenes, wrought with more rainbow
 hues,
 But none so lovely, none so fraught with bliss,
 With life's first brightness, youth's delicious joy,
 That quaffs from every cup nectareous draughts,
 Which the lip seeks in vain from golden bowls,
 When time's dark shade has veiled its early morn.

Boy. Sweet coz, thou art a world too fair, too bright,
 For such a quiet, home-bred bliss as this!
 Why, thou wert formed to fire the poet's song,
 To lend new valor to the warrior's arm,
 And queen it o'er the mighty and the brave,
 Low sighing at thy feet. Nay, never smile
 With such a pretty air of proud disdain,
 As though thou'dst scorn such triumph for thy charms.

But yester eve, beneath this trellised vine,
 I heard our kinsman, Mordecai, discourse
 With Joatham, the rabbi—and they said
 Thy brow was formed to grace a diadem,—
 And pity 't were thou wast not born a queen.

Esther. A queen, saidst thou?
 Far be such fate from me! I thank my God
 That he has placed me in a humbler sphere,
 Where peace and love, and sweet affections grow,
 Like fragrant violets, nurtured in the shade.
 Believe me, boy,—I speak no idle words,—
 I'd rather be a captive Jewish maid,
 Cherished by Mordecai, beloved by thee,
 Than reign unriyaled o'er this mighty realm,
 Clothed with the splendor of its lawful queen!

[Enter Mordecai.]

Mordecai. Thou wouldst not be a queen!
 Saidst thou not so my child?

Esther. In truth I did,—save of my father's heart!
 That is the only empire which I crave.
 For there I can maintain my queenly state,
 Without a cumbrous crown to press my brow,
 Within whose jewelled circlet lurk sharp thorns
 That pierce the maddening brain—wear such who
 will—
 I ask no richer diadem than this
 Which crowns me now, woven by Azor's hand,
 Of buds and simple bells that drink the dew,
 And cool my temples with their balmy breath.

Mordecai. My child, for years
 Thy smile has been the sunlight of my heart,
 Thy voice, the music I best loved to hear,—
 Yea, sweeter seemed it than the strains rung forth
 From Judah's harp, when with a lofty tone,
 It told the glories of our princely race.
 I know for thee ambition has no charms,
 No syren voice to lure thy gentle soul
 From quiet joys, and the fond interchange
 Of kindly thought, to climb her dangerous heights.
 But duty often prompts us to forego
 Our cherished hopes, and yield to her control,—
 And now her voice is murmuring in my ear

Solemn and stern, like those unearthly sounds
 Which Moses heard from out the burning bush,
 And 'midst the thunders of that dreadful mount
 Where God declared his law; or that which fell
 On Abraham's startled ear, when him it bade
 Lead forth unto Moriah's mount his son,
 His only son, the child of his old age,
 And offer him a precious sacrifice
 Unto the Lord his God.

Esther. And art thou too, my father, thus required
 To show thy faith, and seal it with the blood
 Of her, thou long hast cherished as a child?
 If so, I ready stand—nor shall the sin
 Of disobedience rest upon my head.

Mordecai. Not with thy blood, my child—oh, not
 with that!
 But I must ask thee to surrender what
 Thou hold'st than life more dear. Yet, boots it not,
 Perchance, more to unfold.—Didst thou not say
 Thou wouldest not be a queen?

Esther. And dost thou speak with earnest thought of
 this?
 I never *dreamed* that such a thing *could* be!
 Nor would I have it so.—I can stand forth
 At thy command and dare even death itself;
 Yea, cheerfully lie down as on a couch,
 And bare my bosom to the sacred knife,
 If so my God ordains. Ah! rather far
 Would I do this than scale that giddy height,
 Whence I so late beheld one, bright and fair
 As ever wore earth's proudest diadem,
 Dashed headlong down, without one warning word,—
 The sport and victim of a tyrant's will!

Mordecai. A moment list, my child. Time serves
 not now
 To test the justice of the monarch's act,
 Or scan the merits of the banished queen.
 We are sad exiles from our palmy vales,
 We languish for the music of our streams,
 And the green hills o'er which our fathers roved.
 Long, long thou know'st we have besought our God
 To loose our galling bonds, and lead us forth

From out the stranger's land, to our own soil,—
 That goodly soil, where rest our father's bones,
 And where our God has made his presence known.
 Exiles we are, beneath a pagan sway—
 Yet has this prince, a heathen though he be,
 Granted us many boons, and been our shield
 From evils that assailed. He lent us aid,
 When we implored it, to rebuild the temple,—
 And free permission has he ever given,
 That we adore our God, and keep our fasts,
 And hold our solemn festivals, unharmed,
 Unscathed by all.

Esther. And yet my father—

Mordecai. Nay, sweetest daughter, patience yet a while.

This heathen king is lenient to our race,
 And many favors may be wrought for us,
 Perchance, deliverance from our irksome bonds,
 By a most weak and humble instrument,
 Whom God shall raise, and station near the throne.
 Nay, Esther, start not—by that changeful look,
 I see thou read'st my purpose. Say'st thou, yea ?
 Or dost thou with a maiden's timid fears,
 Shrink from fulfilling the high destiny
 To which by Heaven thou 'rt called ? Full well thou knowest

The edict is abroad through the wide realm,
 For the ingathering of its fairest maids.
 Fast are they thronging in,—but go thou forth,
 Bright in the peerless lustre of thy charms,
 Strong in thy purpose, and the prize is won ;
 The crown is thine, thy people are redeemed,
 And songs of grateful joy shall greet thine ears,
 And blessings wafted from a thousand tongues,
 Make thy full cup of happiness o'erflow.

Esther. My father ! this is but a fevered dream,—
 Unreal ! impossible ! it cannot be !
 Send me not forth to such a cruel fate !
 Still be my dwelling-place thy sheltering arms !
 There let me rest, thy tender love my shield,
 Thy guardian care the blessing of my life.
 E'en should I win the favor of the king,

(But vain, preposterous, such an idle thought !)
 What snares beset my path ! what perils sore !
 Perils that wait on kings ! Remember her
 Who like the morning star so lately shone
 The very cynosure of happiness
 And joy ! Remember beauteous Vashti,
 Queenly and gracious—oh, remember her,
 And for thy daughter dread such fearful doom !

Mordecai. I can dread naught for thee, naught for myself,

When God's own finger points to duty's path.
 My people are oppressed,—prophets and kings,
 The anointed ones of heaven,—babes at the breast,
 Mothers and maids, and men of fourscore years,
 Whose youth has withered in a foreign soil,
 All wear the chains, the galling chains of slaves,—
 And thou alone canst free them. Thou, the chosen,
 The appointed one, the ordained of heaven,
 And raised to greatness for this work alone !

Esther. Alas ! my father, think upon my youth,
 My gentle sex, my humble, quiet life,
 Reared amid birds, and flowers, and loving hearts,
 From which mine drank, as from a gushing fount
 Full draughts of bliss. From dawning infancy,
 Where'er I turned, fond eyes met mine with smiles,
 Kind arms upheld, and gentle voices blessed,—
 While like a clinging vine I closer twined,
 And threw my tendrils forth, seeking support,
 And basking in the ever radiant glow,
 That like a sunbeam pure affection wore.
 For such a lowly, cherished one as this,
 The task thou nam'st is all too vast and high.
 It asks a mighty hand, a lofty soul,
 Stern and experienced, wise in council,
 Armed at all points with courage and resolve,
 A fitting instrument for heaven's high will.

Mordecai. Thou know'st, my child,
 That in his sovereign wisdom, dark to us,
 The God who reigns above oft chooses weak,
 The weakest even, and humblest instruments
 To work his will. The rod that Aaron bore,
 Was but a dead and powerless thing to sight,

Till his Almighty breath fanned it to life,
 And clothed its naked stem with odorous flowers,
 That yielded in their turn miraculous,
 The almond's grateful fruit. So Moses' rod,
 Instinct with power divine, smote on the rock,
 And forth there gushed a pure translucent stream,
 To bless the thirsting tribes. Thus, too, the hand
 Of that great priest and prophet of our race,
 A human hand,—feeble and frail as this,
 But used by God to work his high behests,
 Moved back the waters of the rushing sea,
 Till high up-reared, like crystal walls they stood
 On either side,—while safe our fathers passed,
 And sang their songs of triumph on the shore.
 While as they onward went, the ocean closed,
 And buried in its silent depths profound,
 The dark Egyptian and his mighty host.
 Praise Him, my child ! He is our fathers' God,
 Our guardian, and our shield !

Esther. I praise Him ever, when the rising morn
 Sends light and beauty through the wakening earth,
 And when the evening dews gently distil,
 And the fair moon with all her host of stars
 Come forth to keep their silent watch above.
 And dearest father, 'mid the temple's pomp
 My prayers and thankful songs ascend to Him.
 But in the quiet of my own dear home,
 My purest offerings on his altar rest,—
 For there my cup o'erflows, and my full heart
 Pours forth its grateful tribute for the love
 Which in a thousand forms blesses my life,
 And crowns each day with joy. Each day, till this,—
 When thou wilt force me from thy arms away,
 And change my bliss to wo !

Mordecai. Nay, sweetest daughter, wipe away those
 tears !
 Thy bliss made up of love and innocence,
 Shall change to holy triumph, to delight
 Pure and exalted as the angels know.
 Deem not I lightly sever from my side
 The cherished flower so long my pride and care,—
 That I can calmly see it borne away,

Nor feel the glory of my garden gone.
 But *self* must yield to duty's higher call—
 And in the silence of the midnight hour,
 Such visions dawned upon my dazzled sight,
 As Jacob saw on Bethel's holy plain,
 When angel shapes descending blessed his dreams,
 And brought from heaven their messages of love.
 Mine too were full of promise and high hope,
 Which none can e'er fulfil—save only thou!
 Do then my bidding—yield thee to thy fate,—
 God's finger points the way as visibly
 As did the fiery pillar, when it led
 Through the dark wilderness our wandering sires.

Esther. And is there no escape, my father? None?
 And wilt thou give me to a heathen prince?
 Shut me for ever from thy house and love,
 And rob me of that dear and cherished hope
 Precious to all of David's royal line,
 To whom the promise came,—that from his seed
 Should spring the Saviour destined to redeem,
 And lead to glory our enfranchised race—
 Ah! cañst thou crush this hope? Canst thou endure
 With cruel hands to rend the tender bonds
 Which knit me to my kind, and cast me forth
 An alien from my people and my home?

Mordecai. I cast thee forth, to be received again
 With tenfold love! Think not, my child, that moved
 By the false whispers of ambition's voice,
 I trust thee from my arms to the world's snares,
 In search of greatness for thyself or me.
 God reads my heart, and his all-seeing eye
 Knows with what bitter anguish it is racked
 By the most sad and stern necessity,
 Of yielding thee, my joy, my dearest pride,
 The sunlight of my home, its all of bliss,
 To the great work which thou art called to do.
 Think'st thou, sweet daughter, were we seated now
 Beneath our native palms, that lave their boughs
 In the cool gushing of Siloa's wave,
 Singing the songs of Zion, while our tribes
 Held proudly up the ark of Zion's God,—
 I would not rather see thy youthful brow

Wearing as now its crown of simple flowers,
 Than crave for it the richest diadem,
 That e'er encircled royalty's proud head ?
 The blood of David's high and mighty line
 Flows in thy azure veins—and *pagan* crown
 Can add no lustre to thy regal brow,
 Though sown with orient gems, the wonder
 Of the world !

Esther. I fear me much thou buildest mighty hopes
 On a foundation false and frail indeed !
 I am a timid maid, powerless and weak,
 That like the cowering dove, shrink in my flight
 From the fierce glancing of the eagle's eye,
 And seek the covert of some friendly shade
 To smooth my ruffled wing. This trembling hand
 Were nerveless in thy cause,—it scarce can draw
 The silken string of Azor's flexile bow ;
 And this poor heart knows naught of valor's throb,—
 Its pulses answer only to the tones
 Of grateful piety and gentle love.

Mordecai. But it has noble cords untouched till now,
 Which may respond to the high notes of joy,
 That like the swelling of the ocean waves,
 When the bright moon rides o'er them in her might,
 Shall burst responsive from a nation's voice,
 And hail thee their deliverer !

Esther. Remember thee, my father, whence I sprang ;
 And ne'er suppose that yonder haughty king,
 Would take unto his bosom and his throne
 A Jewish maid, one of that hated race,
 Despised and scoffed at as a leprous taint,
 And made a mark for unbelieving tongues
 To break their bitter gibes and jests upon !
 No ! he would blight me with his withering frown,
 And for my daring pour on all my race
 The vials of his wrath !

Mordecai. My daughter, none thy lineage yet shall
 know !
 Trust this to me—it shall be wisely planned—
 And so thou grant thy father's earnest prayer,
 All shall be well for thee and for thy race.

Esther. 'T is no light sacrifice which thou dost ask !

No trifling test of deep and fervent love,
 Wrung from my struggling heart ! Must I then quit
 Father and friends, and every household tie ?
 Customs endeared by long and early use,
 And join no more in feasts and sacrifice,
 And solemn fasts, known only to our tribes ?
 My father, this doth ask for deeper thought,
 Earnest and high, and commune with my God.
 I go to seek his aid, his grace implore,
 And when the conflict of my soul is past,
 I will come forth and tell thee my resolves.

Mordecai. Bless thee, my child ! and may our fathers' God
 Shed on thy youthful head his richest dews,
 And guide thy gentle steps through verdant paths,
 And by the borders of translucent streams,
 To peace and joy at last !

[*Exeunt.*

SCENE VII.—*An apartment in the palace of Shushan.*

Hegai discovered writing. Enter Memucan.

Memucan. Well met, Hegai ! By thy look of ease,
 And the calm quiet of thy tranquil brow,
 I draw ill auguries for our royal lord.
 Thou hast, methinks, more leisure than beseems
 His weal or wish. How stands it with thee now ?
 Hast many maidens yet beneath thy care ?
 Or do they slowly come ? Fearing, perchance,
 To trust the royal mandate.

Hegai. Not so, my lord. Fast as the ocean waves
 Kiss the white beach, so fast the thronging maids
 Besiege our gates ; each eager for the prize,
 And dazzled by the prospect of a crown.

Memucan. Brave tidings these ! And are the damsels fair,

Such as may chance to please the monarch's eye ?

Hegai. Yea, some of them surpassing fair, indeed,—
 Lovely, and soft as the resplendent moon
 When forth she breaks through clouds of silvery
 light !

Various their charms—maids from the Tigris
 With bright golden hair, and glorious eyes,

Blue as the azure of their cloudless heavens.
 Others from Cashmere's vale, whose glowing charms
 Outvie the splendor of the opening rose,
 While laughing dimples, ever and anon,
 Disturb the slumbering crimson of their cheeks,
 Soft as the lucid circles of the lake,
 When the bland zephyr woos it.

Memucan. Hegai, thou dost kindle with thy theme !
 Sure, wondrous strong must be the witching spell
 That moves a bosom waveless as thine own,
 To send forth such a glowing burst of words !
 But midst this radiant throng, is there not one
 Distinguished o'er her mates ? One who may charm
 With look and voice the king's fastidious taste,
 And win him to forego the vain regrets
 Which still he nurtures for that banished one,
 Who shared so long his kingdom and his throne,
 And lost them by her overweening pride ?

Hegai. Yes, there is one, more glorious than the
 dream
 That steals amid the fragrance of the rose,
 And the soft sighing of the bulbul's voice,
 Upon the youthful poet's raptured soul !

Memucan. Thou dost arouse my wonder mightily !
 Whence came this peerless maid ? her lineage,
 And her name ? Hast thou of them heard aught ?

Hegai. My lord,
 All that I know unto thine asking ear
 I willingly unfold. One sultry eve,
 Just as the sun threw his declining rays
 Through yonder lattice screen, a maiden veiled
 Stood at our gates, attended by a youth
 Who wore the habit of a Persian slave.
 Humble he seemed and to the damsel paid
 Lowly submission as his place became.
 No word she spake, though oft I questioned her,—
 But by the tremulous motion of her veil,
 Which close she crowded round her drooping face,
 I saw she wept. Compassion moved my heart,
 And quick admitting them, I strove to learn
 From the young page the secret of her grief,
 And on what errand hitherward she came.

There too within his eyes stood gathered drops,
 But with a manly hand he dashed them down,
 And brief replied—" That by her kinsman urged,
 His gentle mistress sought these palace walls
 Obedient to the mandate of the king,
 And humbly hoping to obtain his grace.
 She was the offspring of a princely line,
 Worthy to mingle with the royal race
 That Persia made her boast. Esther, her name ;"—
 But farther revelation made he none,
 Forbidden, as he said, aught more to tell.

Memucan. And did he then retire ?

Hegai. He did, my lord. But first on bended knee,
 And with a passion that convulsed his frame,
 He caught the maiden's hand, and sealed his lips
 A minute's space upon its spotless snow,—
 Then rising quick, with low obeisance,
 Hurried from my sight.

Memucan. And uttered she no word ? that trembling maid,

Thus left alone beneath a stranger's care ?

Hegai. Naught said she—but her low and frequent sighs
 Broke on my ear, telling the bitter strife
 That shook her soul, I sought in vain to soothe,
 Then yielding her to gentle Mirza's care,
 I left her till the morn.

Memucan. Thou sawest her then ?

Hegai. I did, my lord,— and started back amazed
 At the bright radiance of her matchless charms !
 Long years I've held this place, and viewed each day
 Of lovely maids, all the most bright and fair,
 But none like her.—Not Georgia's dark-eyed girls,
 Perfect in shape, dazzling in loveliness,
 Nor the soft beauties of Circassia's land,
 Full of sweet grace and witching tenderness,
 Can boast such exquisite and wondrous charms
 As stamp perfection on this stranger maid.

Memucan. If she is all thou paintest, good Hegai,
 Our sovereign lord ere long will find a bride
 Worthy his love, and basking in her smile,
 Forget to murmur for his banished queen.

Hegai. Nay doubt it not. Though few can please his eye,

Nice to excess in choice of female charms,
He ne'er unmoved can see this matchless one.

Assured in serving her, I serve my queen,
I minister with most peculiar care

To all her wants,—nor leave her aught to ask.
Seven gentle maids, fairer than houris,

Constant attend to catch her slightest wish,
And serve her person with officious zeal.

Jewels of priceless worth, and vestments rich,
With fragrant myrrh, odors and spices rare,
Are heaped with hand unsparing at her feet.

To her, the fairest one, are likewise given
The stately rooms, graced with bright hangings
Artfully arranged with golden cords,
And rings of silver, wrought by cunning hands.
While to refresh the air, cool fountains play,
And grateful incense, wreathed from censers rich,
Breathes round delicious perfume.

Memucan. And if ambition is her leading star,
Doubtless she liketh well this luxury
And pomp,—drawing bright omens from the zeal,
That proffers her the homage due a queen.

Hegai. Ambition prompts her not.—Her face, her mien,
The soft expression of her glancing eye,
Tell not ambition's tale. No idle wish
To rival her compeers, no proud conceit
Of her own passing loveliness, e'er stirs
Her tranquil soul. Full of all gentleness,
Calm as the dewy star that evening loves,
And blushing with sweet maiden bashfulness
At word or look of praise, she brightly shines
Amid the lesser lights that round her beam,
Eclipsing all, with her effulgent rays.
Fraught with some high and holy aim she seems,—
Some deep unfathomed mystery ne'er told,
That moves her, for what end none knoweth yet,
To seek our monarch's grace.

Memucan. A crown and royal state are aim enough;
I deem naught mightier brings her to our gates.

Soon shall be known if this transcendant one
 Wins kingly favor and a queenly crown.
 Till then, farewell ;—my duty calls from hence,—
 Sterner than thine,—moving mid gentle shapes,
 And ministering to nature's loveliest works.
 Farewell ! and peace be thine !

[Exit.]

SCENE VIII.—*An apartment in the palace. Ahasuerus, king of Persia, and Memucan*

Memucan. Hail, mighty king !
 May peace and joy be thine ! and soft repose,
 After the toils of battle yield thee rest !
 Thy presence like the vivifying rays
 Of yon bright sun, brings life into our hearts,—
 We joy to welcome thee, our conquering lord !
 To see around thy brow the laurel wreath
 Of triumph and renown, and hear thy step
 Sounding again within the marble courts
 Of Shushan's palace fair !

Ahasuerus. Thanks for thy greeting, Memucan.
 Grateful

Such honest warmth, to the o'er-wearied ear
 Deafened with jarring sounds of bloody war.
 I have, 't is true, returned a conqueror ;
 The brazen gates of haughty Babylon
 Have oped before my might, and her proud towers
 Have at my bidding bowed low to the dust.
 My foes I have subdued, my throne stands firm,
 Millions of voices raise the glad acclaim,
 And hail me victor with triumphant songs !
 Yet dove-eyed peace broods not within my heart ;
 Vain the world's homage to assuage its pangs,—
 Pangs of regret for her, the banished one,
 Who now would greet, with smiles of radiant love
 And songs of soul-felt joy, her conquering lord.
 My kingdom's wealth, my honors and renown,
 I would resign,—all, all without a sigh,
 Could I recall that act, that cruel act
 Which drove her from my arms !

Memucan. Thy pardon, gracious king ! I fain would
 soothe

These vain regrets, and point to future joys.
 I fain would name yon fair assembled throng
 Of maidens, bright and beautiful as morn,
 Who wait thy fiat to dismiss their fears,
 Or with fruition crown their fondest hopes.
 'Mongst all those flowers of maiden loveliness,
 Blooms there not one, my liege, one gentle form,
 On whose fair brow thy royal hand may place
 The queenly crown, and deem it well bestowed?

Ahasuerus. None such I yet have seen,—
 And if not there, throughout this spacious world
 Vain would the search be made. There lives not one
 Upon this solid earth, like her I mourn,—
 So fair! so gloriously beautiful!

Memucan. But yet, great king, among yon lovely
 band

There moves a maid, more beatiful by far
 Than thought e'er framed, or raptured dream portrayed,
 In the full light of her resplendent charms,
 Thou wilt forget all former loves and joys;
 Dim will their memory wax, as the pale beam
 Of midnight's glimmering star shines faint and weak,
 Beside the lustre of the full-orbed moon!
 Pardon the boldness of thy servant's words,
 Love prompts my speech, else would I not presume
 Thus far to—

Ahasuerus. Bold are they in good truth! But prove
 they false,
 My vengeance lights on thee! Declare from whence
 The tidings came, and who has dared to say
 The maiden rivals Vashti?

Memucan. Great king, the maiden's fame abroad has
 crept,
 Even from her guarded bower,—and by it urged
 I questioned Hegai, thy chamberlain,
 Touching the rumored tale—all he confirmed,
 And with unwonted eloquence discoursed
 Of her unequalled charms most ravishing,
 And noble soul, scorning all low desires.

Ahasuerus. Mine is an eye most difficult to please
 As well thou know'st; and seldom doth it rest
 Upon a face, however fair and bright,

But it discovers some deformity
 To mar the whole and disenchant my gaze.
 But if this maiden prove so heavenly fair,
 As thou wouldest fain persuade me to believe,
 I'll wed her straight with pomp and revelry,
 And make her partner of my heart and throne.
 Go, bid Hegai send her to me, quick,—
 I would behold this wonder of the world,
 Whom thou, bold man, hast dared with lawless tongue
 To laud above thy queen,—alas ! alas !
 That I should say, she is no more a queen !
 Sunk from my sight ! yet fallen though she be,
 She leaves no brighter star in all the heavens.
 And hear me swear,—yea, register my oath !
 By all the gods we worship, should this maid
 Not verify thy words, or should she prove
 In aught less fair and beauteous to my sight,
 Than her I loved,—and still *do* love, my lord,
 Spite of her scorn, and my most rash decree,
 She, too, shall seek yon walls, and idly there
 Wear out her life, the plaything of an hour,
 While my dishonored queen shall be recalled,
 And all shall kneel in homage to her sway !

Memucan. Great is the king ! his word is ever just !
 Low bend his slaves submissive to his will,
 Anxious by swift obedience to attest
 Their zeal and love. With eager feet I haste
 To do thy bidding. Pardon, my sovereign,
 If in aught I err. [Exeunt.

SCENE IX.—*In the house of Mordecai. Mordecai and Azor.*

Mordecai. It is a glorious eve !
 How pure the air, laden with balmy sweets
 From bud and flower that love the silent dews,
 But hide their perfume from the garish day !
 How stainless yon bright arch ! and mark those clouds,
 That paint the western sky ; what gorgeous hues !
 What gay fantastic shapes ! how swift they change,
 And in their airy change, each radiant form

Seems lovelier than the last ! The whispering breeze
 Is redolent of sweets, and fans my cheek
 With such bland motion, as an angel's wing
 Would give methinks. Come, Azor, let us forth
 To breathe the air of this most blessed eve,
 Beside yon fountain's brink, *her* favorite seat,—
 O'erarched with graceful vines, that ask her hand,
 But vainly ask, to train their rank luxuriance.

[*They go out and seat themselves beside the fountain.*]

Azor. Nay, day by day, I've trained them for her sake,

And oft at twilight's hour, as here I sat
 In meditation deep, the fountain's flow
 Seemed like the murmurs of her gentle voice,
 And all that ministered to sense or soul,
 All objects and all thoughts,—the perfumed flowers,
 The evening song of birds, the insects' hum,
 The gorgeous clouds of heaven, the starry hosts,
 The rosy beam of yonder planet fair,
 And the unrivalled beauty of the moon,—
 Have whispered to my inmost heart of her,
 Who once in happier days, blest with her smiles
 Our home, and shed around a beaming light
 On all that since is dark !

Mordecai. Hush these regrets !

List the low plaint of Judah's captive sons,
 And triumph that a champion has arisen,
 Yea, even for them the slighted and despised !
 Mourn not for her, the flower we cherished long,
 And nurtured with affection's tears and smiles,
 She has gone forth strong in her heart's pure faith,
 Invincible in virgin innocence,
 And guarded by the arm of Israel's God.
 Thus with a triple shield of adamant
 Defended well, she sallied to her task,
 Crushing each gentle hope, each cherished wish,
 Home-born, and whispering of joy to come,
 In the high hope deliverance to achieve
 For those who sadly sing their exile strain
 Far from Judea's land. Yon rising moon
 Twelve times her silver horn has filled with light,

Since my heart's treasure left these circling arms
 To seek the palace walls—and patiently
 I have endured uncertainty's dread pangs,
 That like a gnawing worm tugged at my heart,
 Drinking its very life-blood, drop by drop,—
 Most patiently, till now,—now, when suspense
 Has grown to agony, more bitter far,
 Than sad assurance of extremest ill.

Azor. Alas ! alas ! so beautiful ! so young !
 So rich in all those graceful attributes,
 That make soft woman in her weakness strong !
 And now ! oh, God, what has she now become !

Mordecai. Whate'er to us she seems—a rifled flower,
 Cast forth to perish from the spoiler's hand,
 Or that same flower nurtured by kingly pride,
 And taught to shed its beauty o'er the throne,
 Round which a nation kneels,—in God's pure eye,
 She is a stainless and a holy thing—
 By her renouncement of each selfish thought,
 Her singleness of heart, that to one end,
 One noble purpose, led her forth to dare
 The obloquy or plaudits of the world,
 Indifferent to each, so she achieved
 Her nation's safety from besetting foes,—
 She is so purged from every taint of earth,
 So spotless white, that naught dare e'er assail
 Her heaven-born purity. Whate'er her fate,
 Untouched she stands,—nor calumny's foul breath,
 Nor withering scorn, with her low demon laugh,
 Can cast one shadow on her stainless name.
 It is engraved in characters of light,
 On thousand hearts, whose latest pulse will throb
 With love, and pride, and holy gratitude,
 At the high courage of this matchless maid.

[Enter Joatham, a Jewish Rabbi.]

Joatham. Joy to thee, Mordecai ! To God the praise !
 Praise and thanksgiving from our inmost hearts,—
 For lo ! o'er Persia reigns a Jewish maid !

Mordecai. God of my fathers ! bless him for these
 words !
 Even with such blessings as the patriarch gave

To Jacob, his first-born ! My brother, speak !
 Whence came these tidings? know'st thou of their
 truth ?

Joatham. Yea, verily, I do ;
 But now, within the crowded palace court,
 I mingled with the throng, and heard the words,
 Which rumor with her hundred busy tongues,
 E'en at this moment, bruits through all the land.
 The Lord has heard us—Esther is the queen !
 The monarch saw, and ravished with her charms,
 Placed on her gentle head the golden crown,
 And on the coming day with princely pomp
 Proclaims his beauteous bride. Elate with joy,
 I sought thee straight through every crowded street,
 And marvelled greatly at thy absence strange,
 Just at the moment when our cherished hopes,
 Were ripening to perfection.—And apart
 From all the world, beside this quiet fount,
 Thyself as quiet as its lucid wave
 That sparkles 'neath the moon, I find thee now,
 And pour my tidings on thy grateful ear.

Mordecai. To Israel's Guardian God be all the
 praise !

To him, who now, as erst in days of old,
 Bends down his ear to catch his people's cry,
 And through thick gathering clouds bids light to
 shine !

Since on her high emprise my child went forth,
 Thou know'st my brother how my life has passed ;
 How, as each weary day went slowly by,
 I lingered near the spot wherein she dwelt,
 In hopes, perchance, to catch some whispered word,
 Dropped in the palace court, of her I love,—
 Yea, with a love stronger than nature's own,
 Which bade her call another by the name,
 Affection gave to me. A long, long year
 Has lingered on. But as the time drew near
 Which should decide her fate, fulfil my hopes,
 Or blast them with a word—I could endure,
 But with a coward heart, the dread suspense
 That tortured every nerve, and hither fled,

Where Azor lingered lone, a hermit sad,
To wait the tidings God has pleased to send.

Joatham. Full of high import are they,—bearing to us

Results beyond our ken. Now, let us forth,
And gird us for our work. Time wears apace,
Bearing our fleeting sands with viewless speed
On to oblivion's gulf.

Mordecai. First seek with me the temple; there to raise

Our grateful songs, and ask for farther aid.
Come with us, Azor. Downcast is thine eye,
Nor wears thy pallid cheek the hue of joy;
Come, swell our hymn of triumph, and forget
Each selfish feeling in a nation's joy!

[*Exeunt omnes.*

ACT II.

SCENE I.—*An apartment in the house of Haman.*
Haman and Zeresh.

Zeresh. Ay, 't was a princely feast!
And what a peerless bride! how passing fair!
Like the bright pageant of a midnight dream,
So glorious looked she in her splendid state.
Yet not the radiance of her queenly crown,
The glittering gems that blazed upon her breast,
Nor the rich flowing of her costly robes,
So charmed the eye, so won the ravished heart,
As her enchanting grace, her gentle mien,
Her soul-lit eyes, her chastened dignity,
So sweetly feminine, such as beseemed
A young and royal bride.

Haman. She looks, indeed, well worth a monarch's love,—

And joy has warmed the royal bridegroom's heart
 To acts of grace, worthy his princely name.
 For not alone to us, but to the queen,
 And all who graced the feast, as well thou knowest,
 Were presents given of rare and costly price.
 But nobler still,—to many who have dwelt
 For weary years, imprisoned in darksome vaults,
 Where the glad light of day no entrance found,
 The king has granted pardon and release.
 Yea, even the revenues now due are stopped,—
 So he commands, unwilling to extort
 Aught from his subjects in this hour of joy.

Zeresh. These are most noble deeds!
 And while this favor-giving mood endures,
 Wilt thou not wait, my lord, to catch his smile,
 And watch to execute each wayward wish,
 Quick as it rises to the monarch's lip,
 And so commend thee by thy ready zeal,
 That thou mayst win the prize of loyalty,
 And rise to princely honors and renown?

Haman. Well hast thou read my purpose. May the gods

Aid my aspiring steps to climb that height,
 Whence I may look on all who move below
 As creatures of my will, the passive tools
 Of my unbridled power.

Zeresh. That glorious destiny I crave for thee,—
 Then wilt thou triumph o'er the haughty head
 Of Memucan, that arrogant, proud man,
 Who wrought Queen Vashti's fall, and sways the king

With artful wiles, to ruin whom he lists.

Haman. Ere long his pride shall stoop, and that of all

Who in the path of my ambition stand.
 Already I am viewed with jealous eyes,
 By those who seek the royal ear to gain—
 But futile all their hopes—their cautions vain—
 I know my game, nor fear to lose the stake—
 The goal's in view,—ambition spurs me on
 To grasp the prize, nor rest I till 't is mine.

Zeresh. May the gods aid thee to achieve this task!

For me, I'll weary them with ceaseless prayers,
To smile propitious on thy high designs.

Haman. Do, if thou wilt ;
But yet I feel that neither earth nor heaven
Can mar my purpose now ; no living power
Can check my bold career, that onward leads
To that proud eminence where glory dwells.

Zeresh. Prophetic prove thy words !
Then will he consummate my dearest wish.

Haman. Wait a brief space, and not an eye shall
see

A greater light, shining 'twixt me and him,
Who with imperial hand the sceptre sways
O'er this broad land. Farewell, I must away—
A summons waits me to attend the king,
And those he honors most, who with prompt heart
Obey his sovereign will.

Zeresh. Haste then on flying feet to seek his face,—
And mayst thou realize the glorious dream,
That with its dazzling hopes enchanteth thine eye.
Farewell, we meet again at evening's hour.

[Exit Haman.]

SCENE II.—*An apartment in the palace. Esther surrounded by her maidens. Enter Æratheus.*

Æratheus. Most gracious queen,
A reverend man waits at the palace gates,
And craves, with faltering voice and earnest air,
Permission to address thy royal ear.

Esther. Why seeks he me ?
Know'st thou his name, or on what errand bent
He hither comes ?

Æratheus. He is a Jew, great queen,—
And bids me say he would somewhat reveal,
Touching the safety of our gracious king.

Esther (starts and changes color). A Jew saidst
thou ?

And of my lord, he'd speak ? Nay, what of him ?
Here, in the midst of hearts that love him well,
His safety none can menace, none disturb.

Yet, Æratheus, go,—admit this Jew,
 And I will hear the message which he bears.
 And you, my maidens, for a space retire,
 Perchance with greater freedom he will speak,
 If I alone give ear. [They go out.
 One of my kindred people ! Oh, my God,
 Should it be he, who with a father's care
 Nurtured my helpless years ! Lie still, my heart !
 Guardian of Israel, grant me thy support !

Re-enter Æratheus, conducting a man, whose forms and features are concealed by a large mantle.

Esther. Go, Æratheus,—I would be alone,—
 But wait without, whence I may summon thee,
 When I have need. [He retires.

(The Jew throws back the mantle and discovers the person of Mordecai. Esther rushes towards him, and throws herself into his arms.)

Esther. My father ! is it thou ?
 Once more do I behold thee, once again
 Hear thy loved voice, and feel thy warm embrace,
 As erst in days when I did nestle me,
 With a child's love, in thy protecting arms !
 Oh God, I thank thee for such bliss as this !

Mordecai (embracing her). To Persia's queen is
 Mordecai still dear ?
 Amid the splendor of a princely court,
 Amid the homage of adoring slaves,
 Still does she bow before her father's God,
 And still with fervent heart, unchanged and true,
 Cling to her kindred and her ancient race ?

Esther. Oh, doubt me not ! No time can dim my
 love,
 No gilded pomp, no earthly homage vain,
 E'er chase the memory of those early joys,
 Which link my soul with golden chains to thee
 And to my God,—the only just and wise,—
 To whom each day my grateful heart ascends,
 In humble prayer, and bursting songs of praise.

Mordecai. Thanks be to God most high,
 Who holds thee in the hollow of his hand,

Nor leaves thy youthful feet to go astray,
 In error's devious paths. And yet, my child,—
 Or I should say, my queen—

Esther. Nay, father, mock me not with that vain word,

I would be still thy child—still let thy lips
 Bestow on me that fond, endearing name,
 Which wakens memories of the happy past
 Within my grateful soul. When I was left
 A helpless infant on the world's cold breast,
 Then was it thou, who with a father's love
 Nurtured my orphan years—soothed all my griefs,
 And never let me feel what 't was to want
 A tender parent's care. Then, dearest father,
 Call me still thy child, as was thy wont,
 In those young days of brief unclouded joy,
 Nor oh, forsake me now, when glittering snares
 O'erspread my path, and twine around my fæt;
 For now it is, I most require thy love,
 Thy guiding counsel to direct me right.

Mordecai.

Beloved child!

The cherished object of my heart's fond hope,
 Thou ne'er canst know the intense emotion,
 Deep and pure, and all too strong for words,
 Which thought of thee doth kindle in my soul.
 Oh, God forbid that e'er the dazzling pomps,
 The gorgeous vanities that circle thee,
 Should with their specious glare pollute thy heart,
 That young and guileless heart, ne'er warped by
 sin,—

Or bind in icy chains that glowing tide
 Of gentle thoughts, affections pure and sweet,
 Which gushes forth like yonder sparkling stream,
 That by the bright transparency of its wave
 Tells all within its marble fount is pure.

And oh, may nought e'er tempt thee to depart
 From thy own faith to worship heathen gods.
 Sooner come death to end thy brief career,
 Than shame like this, to taint thy spotless name.
 Nor e'er forget, though thou dost grace a throne,
 That He who raised thee to this lofty height,
 Meant not thy glory when He placed thee there,

But chose thee only an an instrument
To serve thy race. Ever remember this,—
And watch to aid them, when the time may come.

Esther. For ever dwells that hope within my heart,
And still I wait, impatient for the hour,
When I perchance may lend my feeble aid
To ease their bondage sore.

Mordecai. Be ever faithful to their cause, my child,
And blessings, such as holy men of old
Invoked upon the good, shall rest on thee.
But hast thou yet to the king's ear revealed
The secret of thy birth?

Esther. Nought knows he yet.—
Obedient to thy will, I have concealed
My lineage and my faith from him, from all,
Save my attendant maid-servants, and two besides,
Who hourly wait submissive to my word.
But now, my father, if thou wilt permit,
All shall be told. Safe rest I in his love,
And fear no ill.

Mordecai. Wait yet awhile,—
Incautious haste may mar our dearest hopes,—
But soon the hour will come, when thou shalt dare,
With fearless lips, avow the God thou servest,
And for thy people ask the monarch's grace.
And now, one question more—and yet methinks,
I scarce need ask thee, if thy lord is kind,
And thou art blest, in this thy high estate?
For never yet marked I thy changeful eye
Gleam with more radiant light,—and on thy cheek
The rose displays its hue, as beautiful
And bright, as when in childhood's sunny hour,
That lovely cheek was pillow'd to its rest
Upon my heart. It tells a tale of peace,
And gives me glad assurance of thy bliss.

Esther. Aright, my father, thou dost read the page,—
In my lord's love I am most blest indeed,
And were he a believer in my faith,
I should have nought to wish. As for my state,
It neither makes nor mars my happiness.—
These regal chambers, where thou seest displayed
With lavish hand the treasures of the East,—

These gorgeous robes, stiff with embroidered gold,
 And sown with gems,—the trappings of a queen,—
 Were but a dismal cell, and galling chains
 To wreath my tortured limbs, and hold imprisoned
 My struggling spirit, fluttering to be free,—
 Without that ray, that soft and mellow ray,
 Which from affection's ever cloudless sun
 Goes forth to gild each object with its light !
 And were it shed, as I oftentimes have dreamed
 Since here I came, beside that fountain's brink,
 Where oft, in days of early happiness,
 I wreathed of fragrant flowers my simple crown,
 And called myself, in sportive mood, a queen,
 I should be blest as now,—nay, far more blest,
 For then my father, and dear Azor too,
 Would be companions of my every hour,
 And dwell with me, and *him*, in quiet joy,
 Free from the thraldom that abides in courts,
 And fetters kings like slaves.

Mordecai. Dreams light as these are not for thee,
 my child,—

Thine is a loftier lot, than thus to while
 An idle life away. Now let me speak
 Of that which brought me here, and which, perchance,
 Won by thy presence to forget all else,
 I have too long delayed. 'Tis of the king
 I fain—

Esther (with alarm). Then 't was no idle feint,—
 those words of fear

By Æratheus brought ! They startled me,—
 But yet a whispered voice stole o'er my ear,
 Breathing thy cherished name, and telling me,
 'T was but a harmless wile, to bring thee here
 To my impatient eyes. But now—oh God !
 What dangers threat my lord ? What form of ill
 Hovers around, waiting to work him wo ?
 Speak, dearest father ! let thy words be brief—
 Suspense is fearful pain.

Mordecai. Nay, be not thus alarmed,—
 The danger threatened, but it shall not fall.
 Now listen to my tale, and to the king
 Make known its purport,—all shall then be well.

Last eve, as at the palace gate I sat
 In musing deep, sudden I was disturbed
 By low and earnest whispers, uttered near,
 In cautious tones, lest even the wind should bear
 Upon its wings one word of the discourse.
 I knew the voices well, for they were those
 Of Teresh and Begthana, lords who kept
 The door of the king's chamber, ere the queen,
 Vashti I mean, was banished from his arms.
 The crowd had passed away, but still I sat.
 Hid by the gathering gloom. They saw me not,—
 I scarcely breathed,—suspicion was awake,
 For I had marked long time these vaunting lords,
 With doubtful thought and jealous scrutiny,
 Knowing full well they treasured 'gainst the king
 Revengeful hearts, for the late queen's disgrace,
 Who lavished on them many royal gifts.
 Earnest they talked of injury done to her,
 Of hatred to the king, warmly expressed,—
 And shocked my ears, which drank each cautious
 word,
 With a base plot, planned with most wicked art,
 Foully to murder their liege lord, their king,
 Before to-morrow's dawn should light the skies.
 Nay, wax not pale,— we shall defeat their plans,
 And turn the threatened mischief on themselves.
 I will not pour into thy trembling ear
 Each detail of their guilt—enough I heard
 To prove their dark design.— 'T was God's own hand
 Which led me to that spot to save thy lord.
 To Him, then, give the praise !

Esther. Yea, from my inmost soul !
 His care is ever round us like a shield,
 In Him we breathe and move,—He gives us life,
 And crowns it ever with His tender love !
 And next to Him, my father, sure to thee
 My thanks and praise are due. I have not words
 To bless thee as I ought,—but thou hast known
 Through many a gliding year, my grateful heart,
 And read'st its feelings now.—Shall I not send
 Direct unto the king and tell him all ?
 And say 't was *thou* who didst detect the plot,

Aimed 'gainst his precious life ? *Thou art a Jew,—*
 'Tis *thou* dost save the king,—and for such deed,
 All who profess our faith may bless thy name.

Mordecai. Do so,—'t is well, perchance,
 And may commend us in the monarch's eyes,
 And so obtain for those we hope to serve
 Some act of grace, which none more need than they ;
 And so farewell, my dear and cherished one !
 I leave thee to thy task, and to the care
 Of Israel's guardian God,—and may He spread
 O'er thy defenceless head his shield of love,
 And guard thee ever from the tempter's power ;
 Serve him with faithful heart, nor ever swerve
 In thought or deed from his most holy law.

Esther. Ah, fear me not !
 Beneath the shelter of his mighty wing
 Alone can peace abide. One more embrace,—
 Alas ! that we should part ! But come again
 Ere long,—some errand frame to bring thee here,
 That I may see thee oft—and love me still ;—
 And, father, think of me, as when I dwelt
 Beneath thy happy roof in by-gone days,
 And thou didst daily fold me in thine arms,
 And pour thy whispered blessings on my head.
 Again, farewell. To Azor bear my love,
 And say I am unchanged.

Mordecai (*embracing her*). Farewell, beloved !
 May peace and joy be thine, and blessings rich,
 Such as our God bestows on those he loves ! [Exit.]

SCENE III.—*In the palace. The King and Memucan.*

Ahasuerus. Ungrateful wretches !
 Thus, with treacherous hearts, to seek my life,
 E'en when with servile smile they bent the knee,
 In mockery of love ! And didst thou say
 The slaves had met their doom ?

Memucan. They have, great king ;—
 Still high they hang upon the fatal tree,
 Warnings to all who dare defy thy power.

Ahasuerus. There let the traitors hang,

For birds obscene to tear their quivering limbs!
 And has this act of Mordecai, the Jew,
 Been on our records placed, good Memucan?
 So would we have it done, and will reward,
 As best we can, his zeal. Till then, my lord,
 Bid him abide within our palace walls,
 And dwell with us as a dear friend would do,
 For we esteem him such.

Memucan. Most gracious king, the record has been made,
 And to the honored Jew shall straight be told
 This farther token of thy signal grace.
 Didst thou not say, it was thy beauteous queen,
 Who thee apprised of this most foul intent
 Against thy sacred life?

Ahasuerus. Ay, she it was,—
 And it is she who sweetens every joy,
 And makes that life, so valueless before,
 A precious boon, full of most rare delight,
 Shed o'er my being by her blessed love.
 Saw'st thou e'er form so perfect and so fair?
 To me it seems all charms of mortal mould
 Wax coarse and dull, besides my peerless bride.
 And as I gaze with still renewed delight,
 Each fleeting moment my unwearied eye
 Catches some touching grace, some syren charm,
 Unseen before, most ravishing and sweet.

Memucan. I am most happy in my sovereign's joy,—
 Long, long may it endure, undimmed by cloud,
 Unruffled by a storm,—perfect and pure
 As the transcendant source from whence it flows.

Ahasuerus. I thank thee, good, my lord,—
 I know thy love, for I have proved its strength,
 And found it true. In trouble's darkest hour
 It did not falter, though I was unjust.
 Yea, when thick clouds were lowering o'er my head,
 And I was shaken with excessive grief,
 I called thee false,—I did thee foulest wrong;—
 For even then, when I most doubted thee,
 Then wast thou striving to restore my peace.
 But what amends a grateful heart can make,
 Thy monarch proffers thee. Ask what thou wilt,

It shall not be withheld. Wealth, honors, power,—
 These are already thine,—but if in aught
 My grateful love can serve thy private wish,
 Speak, and it shall be done.

Mamucan. Accept, most gracious king, my humble
 thanks;

Still be thy smile the guerdon of my love,
 And I have nought to ask. I am so blest
 In all that makes the sum of human wants,
 Or human bliss, that I may rest content,
 Though never more thy hand bestow a boon
 On my poor zeal.—I feel it has been crowned,
 Far, far beyond desert.

Ahasuerus. That could not be, my lord,—
 A faithful heart is priceless in its worth,—
 And since thy modest pride disdains to ask
 For aught the gods have lent me power to give,
 I shall remember thee, whene'er on one,
 More favored than the rest, I would bestow
 A monarch's special grace. Yet, Memucan,
 I oft have thought, and mourned that it was so,
 On thee, above all else, fall many cares,—
 And there are none thy burden to relieve,
 None gifted with like talents as thyself,
 To share the duties of thy lofty place,
 And lighten their discharge. Within my breast
 I have revolved this thing, and looked around,
 Seeking some able mind to act with thee
 In the affairs of state; and now, at length,
 Are my researches crowned with full success:
 And Hammedatha's son, thou know'st him well,
 I have appointed thy coadjutor,—
 A worthy man, and rich in many gifts
 To win regard. Receive him as thy friend,
 Thy fellow servant, and thy sovereign's choice.

Memucan (making an effort to conceal his chagrin).

Haman, that dark Amalekite, my king,
 Can it be him thou mean'st? I could have spared
 His aid,—I need it not,—I love my toils,—
 To me they are but sport. So thou art pleased,
 All labour seemeth light,

Ahasuerus. I am well pleased, none could be better
 so,—

Yet thou, methinks, art vexed, though I but sought
 Thy weal, in this mine act. But it is done
 Beyond recall, nor would I have thee fear
 Aught from the influence of this new ally.
 Thee in my favor he can ne'er supplant.
 Though I esteem him wise, and brave, and good,
 He is as yet a new and untried friend ;
 Whilst thou hast stood the test of purging fires,
 And come forth pure as unadulterate gold.

Memucan. As is my duty, humbly I submit
 To all my king ordains. Yet pardon me,
 If I awhile distrust, and closely scan
 This crafty favorite, who has played his game
 With cunning skill, and most consummate art.
 All may be well,—but yet I like it not.

Ahasuerus. Thou art o'er-cautious, full of jealousy,
 That makes thee most unjust, and slow to give
 The meed which others claim. Too much of this—
 Ere long thou 'lt think with me, nor blame my choice.
 Art for the chase to-day ? The Idumean lords
 Will hunt with us, and rare will be the sport.
 The hour approaches,—see that all 's prepared,
 And meet us in the jasper court at noon.

[*Exit Memucan.*

SCENE IV.—*In the house of Haman. Haman and Zeresh.*

Haman. Yes, Zeresh, I have gained the lofty point,
 On which my proud aspiring hopes were fixed,
 And stand alone on that bold eminence,
 Where rests the sunlight of the royal smile ;
 There bask I in its rays, honored by all
 Who circle round the throne,—yea, all the great
 And mighty of the land, bend low the knee,
 In token of respect,—and all who sit
 In Shushan's gates, or throng her spacious courts,
 Acknowledge Haman, next his sovereign lord,
 Supreme in power,—such is the king's command.
 All, save one man,—who boldly dares withhold
 The homage, yielded as a thing of right
 By nobler far than he.

Zeresh. And who, my lord, is this audacious one,
Who dares defy thy vengeance and thy power?
And for what purpose sets he thee at naught?

Haman. He is a Jew!

One of that impious and accursed race,
Which like a plague-spot mar our beauteous land.
Scattered abroad, they till the fertile earth,
Reap their full crops, and scorn each wholesome law,
Obeying those framed by themselves alone.
Whilst 'gainst our gods they utter blasphemy,
And boast themselves the chosen ones of heaven.

Zeresh. I do abhor them from my very soul!
But for this one, who beards thee in such sort,—
Why suffer him to live? For this offence
His death should be decreed, nor would the king
Refuse such sentence just.

Haman. Were he a common Jew,
One of that vulgar herd who throng our streets,
Or loiter round our courts, his blood should pay
The forfeit of his crime. But this is he,
That very Mordecai, who warned the king
Of the conspiracy against his life,
And thus so won the monarch's grateful heart,
That he, I am most sure, will ne'er consent
To see him suffer harm.

Zeresh. Perchance he errs through ignorance, my
lord;
None may have told him 't was the king's decree,
That all should bend before thee, as to one
Endued with princely power.

Haman. He knows it well,—
And has been often bid to render me
That homage paid by all. But cold he sits,
With look immovable, and haughty air,
Nor deigns by word or sign to recognise
My presence nor my rank.

Zeresh. A stubborn race these Jews have ever been,
Setting at naught the forms that bind all else,
And boasting vainly of their princely blood.
But I would warn thee not to brook the pride,
The haughty arrogance, of this base slave.
Nor he alone, but all his recreant race,

Should feel thy power. Go, use it with the king,
To scourge them from the land, or all too soon,
It will be theirs to crush us in their toils.

Haman. Thou hast said well,—and if my arm has strength,
They shall be swept from earth. I'll to the king,
And cunningly conceal my private wrong,
While I affect his weal, the empire's good,
And thus obtain my end. And so, farewell,
Thy counsel has been wise,—be guarded still,
And triumph shall be ours. [Exit.

SCENE IV.—*In the palace. Ahasuerus. Enter Haman.*

Haman. Hail, mighty king! honor and power are thine,
And blessings wafted from unnumbered tongues
Speak the glad joy, which 'neath thy gentle sway
Swells every breast with loyalty and love.
Favored by thee, peace dwells within the realm,
The arts revive,—thy cities shine with pomp,
While from each tower thy royal banner floats,
Telling to distant lands the glorious tale
Of thy benignant reign.

Ahasuerus. Thanks to the gods! thus prosperous is our state;
Peace, loyalty, and love crown our full cup,
And yield a draught, pure as e'er monarch quaffed,
And which but rarely tempts a monarch's lip.

Haman. And yet, oh king, there is one noxious ill,
Which mid this plenitude of joy and bliss
Pollutes our sight, and asks the reaper's fan,
To purge it from the soil.

Ahasuerus. I know it not;
Sure light must be its power to harm or wound,
Since, when most prone to borrow fancied ill,
This has been still unfelt.

Haman. And yet, great king, thy subjects feel the scourge,
Though thee in thy high state it may not vex.
I need but name the race of Hebrew slaves,

Who through the land are scatter'd far and wide—
 A lawless band, who worship other gods,
 Frame their own laws, and boldly set at naught
 The mandates of their king. Yet do they reap
 With lavish hand the bounties of thy realm,
 And still oppression use, and with hard gripe
 Wring from the poor his mean and scanty store,
 To add to their own hoards. Therefore, oh king,
 Thy people supplicate and cry for aid,—
 Deny them not redress, but send abroad
 Thy fixed and just decree, dooming to death
 These aliens, these despisers of our gods.

Ahasuerus. Can this be so? I have misjudged them
 then,—
 For I have ever thought them void of guile,
 A harmless race, though oftentimes obstinate,—
 Besides, into our royal treasury
 They pour a bounteous tribute, all too rich
 To be rejected thus, at word of thine.

Haman. Oh king, their offering is but small,
 And ever rendered with a grudging heart;
 And for the public good, I still entreat
 Thy sanction to my prayer. Grant it, great king,
 And I will pay ten thousand talents, weighed
 Of virgin silver, from my privy purse
 Into the royal treasury.

Ahasuerus. I ask not this of thee, nor can receive
 The precious ore, though proffered with free heart.
 And much I laud this goodly zeal of thine,
 That caters only for the nation's weal,
 And merges in that care all thought of self.
 But for these Jews,—I scarce can bring my heart
 To work them harm—and yet, thou sayst there's
 need.

Thou wouldst not urge me to an unjust act,
 For thou hast ever shown an earnest wish
 That my fair fame should suffer from no deed
 Unworthy of a king. Therefore, I fear,
 I must decree the fall of this strange race.
 Long have I viewed them with a lenient eye
 And yielded them protection, nor e'er sought
 To filch their wealth, though boundless seemed its
 store,

Or to disturb their feasts, or mar their rites,
 Strange as they were, and most unlike our own.
 Yet if they make me such return as this,
 They shall be punished with unshrinking hand,
 For we can be as swift to deal a blow
 Where 't is deserved, as we are ever prompt
 To lavish favors on a worthy head.
 So punish as thou wilt these ingrate Jews,
 And make their spoil our own.

Haman. Thanks, mighty king ! how will the land
 rejoice,
 To be relieved from this accursed race !
 They all shall die—no remnant shall be left
 To tell that they have been.

Ahasuerus. So let it be,—and with my signet ring,
 Which from my hand I transfer unto thine,
 Seal the decree, and bid our scribes send forth
 Copies through all the land, to signify
 Our royal will, which we therein declare.
 Haste thee, my lord, and when thou dost return,
 Seek me not here, but through yon myrtle walk
 Direct your steps to where a bright kiosk
 Embosomed deep in clustering rose-trees stands.
 Amid their dancing leaves, the bulbul builds,
 And rears her young ;—and there at evening's hour,
 Pours a rich strain of thrilling melody
 To woo her flower beloved. In that sweet spot,
 Fragrant, retired, sacred from prying eyes,
 I love to sit in converse with a few,
 Or else apart from all. There seek me now,
 And with nectareous wine, from vintage rare,
 The goblet shall be crowned high to its brim,
 And lend its inspiration to our souls.

[*Exit Haman.*

SCENE VI.—*Esther, with her attendant maidens. Enter Æratheus.*

Æratheus. Great queen ! e'en now, before the palace
 gates,
 Uttering loud cries, and clothed in sackcloth garb,

There stands the Jew, who hither came erewhile,
To warn thee of the plot against the king.

Esther. Canst thou mean Mordecai?

Æratheus. The same, my queen.

Esther. And wherefore comes he hither clad in
robes

That mourners only wear? Has there been aught
To grieve his righteous soul?

Æratheus. Something he uttered with most bitter
cry,

But what, oh gracious queen, I vainly strove
With earnest ear to learn. Yet, full of wo,
Yea, crushed with agony, the Hebrew seemed.

Esther (*clasping her hands in agitation*). Ah me!

I tremble at thy fearful words,—

Whence comes this grief, this bitterness of soul?

Haste, *Æratheus*, haste—fair raiment take,

And say to Mordecai, Queen Esther sends

Thee garments, fit to clothe thy honored limbs,

And bids thee for her sake, who loves thee much,

Put off thy sackloth robe. Go hence with speed,

And bring me quick return. [*Exit Æratheus*.]

Fatima, summon Hatach; he may know

More of this matter than we yet have learned,

And I would question him. [*Exit Fatima*.]

I am oppressed with doubts and many fears,

A shadow seems to fall upon my heart

And darken all its hopes. Maiden, most dear,

To you is known the secret of my faith,

And can you marvel, then, at all I dread?

Zobeida. Nay, gracious mistress, let us fondly hope
There is no serious cause for grief and fear.

Some custom of thy tribes by thee o'erlooked,

Some venial sin too solemnly bewailed,

Has moved thy zealous kinsman to appear

In mourning garb before the public eye.

Were there aught else, it would have reached thine
ear.

[*Enter Hatach and Æratheus.*]

Æratheus. I have thy bidding, royal mistress, done,
Fair raiment, as thou gav'st command, I took

And spread before the Jew, with earnest word,
 Entreating him to doff the sackcloth robe,
 And gird himself therewith. Such was thy will—
 Yet nought he answered me, no look bestowed
 In token that he heard. But still with cries,
 Piercing and loud, he rent his mourning garb,
 And prone on earth, strewed ashes o'er his head.

Esther. God of my fathers! wherefore mourns he thus?

What deep affliction moves his righteous soul
 To show of grief like this? Good Hatach, speak,
 Therefore I summoned thee, and if thou canst,
 This mystery explain.

Hatach. Most gracious queen, something thy servant heard
 Of a decree sent forth against the Jews,
 Bearing the royal seal. But for what end,
 He knoweth not as yet.

Esther. To work them harm perchance,—it must be so!

Why hidest thou, oh God, thy smiling face
 From those who bend the knee to thee alone,
 Nor incense burn on any shrine save thine!
 Go, Hatach, to the Jew,—tell him, the queen
 Has sent thee to demand his cause of wo,—
 To know if she can serve him, and to ask
 Why on his reverend head he sprinkles dust,
 Why girds around his loins the sackcloth robe,
 And utters cries that rend the listener's heart.

[*Exit Hatach.*

Zobeida, seek with me yon trelliced walk,
 Where the sweet blooms, and odors that I love,
 May soothe my anxious mind, and lend me aid,
 To wait, perchance, his long delayed return
 With patient heart.

[*Exeunt Queen and Zobeida.*

SCENE VII.—*Esther, Zobeida, Hatch.*

Esther. Dost thou say true?

And he, my lord, to whom my vows are given,
Sent forth this mandate stern? That they should
die,—

They, who ne'er harmed him by a traitorous thought,—
All in one day, the aged, and the young,
Should fall beneath the sword's relentless edge?

Hatch. 'T is all too true, my queen.

But he who prompted to the cruel act
Should bear the shame, and suffer for the sin.

'T was Haman,—that proud lord, who fain would scale
The seat of sovereign power, if so he dared—
He, who with foul intent has urged the king
To send forth this decree against the Jews.

Esther. And why pursue them with such bitter
hate?

Are they not quiet dwellers in this land,
Where they are held in bonds? Some, who have
caught

The mantle, as it fell, of holy seers,
And some, whose lineage can be traced to kings,
Ay, to the sires of those, who with the sword
Smote for their sins the race of Amelek,
Whence this proud Haman sprung. Is it for this
His wrath is burning now? This ancient grudge
Passed with long years away? It cannot be,—
Yet this poor nation, exiled and oppressed,
Can nought have done to wake such malice fierce,
As breathes in this decree.

Hatch. Great queen, 't is Mordecai that Haman
hates

With such a swelling flood of vengeful ire,
That he has vowed the ruin of his race
Shall make atonement for his single fault,
If fault it be, that still the Jew forbears
To bend his knee in homage to the earth,
When this proud lord draws nigh.

Esther. Can he be chafed for things so light as this?
Then true it is, beneath that brow of pride

He shrouds a coward soul ! To such an one
 The noble Mordecai should scorn to bend,
 Though he who asked such homage sprang of blood,
 Purer than that which fills the burning veins
 Of this Amalekite—sworn foe of heaven.
 Through many generations God pursued
 His nation with fierce wrath, nor will he now
 Stand idly by, and see his people fall,
 By any remnant of that fated race,
 Whom he decreed to death, for sins abhorred.

Hatach. Yet, gracious queen, with most determined
 heart,
 Their ruin he resolves,—and that no chance
 Should frustrate his intent, a lot he cast,
 To learn the hour most favored by the gods,
 When he might work his foul and dark design,—
 And when he drew it forth, lo, it declared
 That time most fortunate, when should arrive
 The thirteenth day of the month Adar—

Esther. It will not be ! God's hand can wonders
 work,
 And he will ne'er in this dark hour of ill
 Leave those to die, who place in him their trust.

Hatch. Most gracious queen, from Mordecai I bear
 A copy of the mandate which was given
 At Shushan by the king. He sends it thee,
 With humble prayer that thou, without delay,
 Wilt seek the monarch, and entreaty make
 For all whom it concerns.

(*Esther takes the parchment and reads.*)

Esther. Ah, cruel act !
 That dooms to ruin all my fated race,
 And leaves me powerless to avert the blow.
Powerless I said,—for, Hatach, well thou knowest
 It would be madness, even for thy queen
 To stand uncalled before her royal lord.
 Does not the Persian law punish with death
 Such daring deed ?

Hatach. It does, my queen ; unless by mercy touched,
 The sceptre is stretched forth, token of love,
 And sign of royal peace. And sure to thee,
 The high and gracious queen, that rod of power

Would, by its golden touch, make known the joy
 With which our lord delights to welcome thee,
 The source of all his bliss !

Esther. Alas ! alas ! I have slight ground for hope,—
 I, who for thirty long and weary days,
 Have never heard the murmur of his voice,
 No, nor e'en seen the floating of his robe,
 Seen oft by all. And shall I brave his wrath,
 And yet, thus daring, hope to escape with life ?
 But 't is not death I fear, that thus I shrink
 From Mordecai's behest. It is the dread
 Lest, by a fatal risk, I forfeit power
 To aid him in worse need at future time,
 Should need again occur. Zobeida, speak,
 Thou art a woman, and perchance canst share
 My woman's thoughts, in this distracting hour.

Zobeida. Then, gentle mistress, I will dare to say,
 Abide in safety here. Alas ! I pray,
 I humbly pray, thou wilt not venture forth,
 On this thy fearful mission ! 'T is to tempt
 The lion's wrath, which who may brave and live ?
 'T was for a less offence Queen Vashti fell,
 And e'en without such warming monitor ;
 Not vainly have I breathed the air of courts,
 For I have learned therein how mad it is
 E'en for the highest, and the best beloved,
 To dare a monarch's frown.

Esther. Maiden, I yield me to thy counselling,
 I feel thou art right, and that 't were sin in me
 To cast away my life on such a chance.
 It may be useful yet to Israel's cause,
 And for that holy end I'll cherish it.
 Then, Hatach, go,—again seek Mordecai,
 And say to him, Queen Esther fears to stand
 Uncalled before her lord. Declare to him
 The law, which dooms to death whoe'er offends,
 By daring to intrude without command
 Upon the monarch's sight.—Expound it all,
 And bid him guide me in some other course,
 By which more surely I may lend him aid.

[*Exit Hatach.*

SCENE VIII.—*An apartment in the house of Mordecai.*
Mordecai and Joatham.

Joatham. Alas! my brother, all our hopes are vain!
 Darkness and clouds surround the throne of God,
 And we are left to die!—Wo for our tribes,
 Our hapless tribes! His chosen people once,
 Now outcasts from His grace,—banished,—in bonds,—
 Our prophets low, our priests a broken race,
 Our homes, our heritage, an empty name,—
 Our very altars, reared on heathen soil!—
 And now decreed by heathen swords to bleed,
 We helpless stand, with none to save or aid.
 Oh, how inscrutable are heaven's decrees!

Mordecai. Dark and inscrutable to mortal eye,
 But ordered all in wisdom and in love.
 My brother, murmur not, but trust in God!
 He can confound our foes, ere yet the day
 Decreed for our destruction shall arrive,
 And give us joyful hearts to raise the song
 Of triumph and deliverance. Trust in Him,
 Who is almighty to defend and save,
 Who midst unnumbered sins our fathers spared,
 Guided their wandering feet through mazes dark,
 And though they called on other gods to save,
 Pitied their drooping faith, and with kind hand,
 Still led them on, fed them with angels' food,
 And gave each hour some token of His love,
 His rich forbearing love, to cheer their hearts.
 Then tempt him not with doubt,—this gracious God,—
 Nor once admit the thought that He will spare
 That base Amalekite, against whose race
 His vengeance has been sworn, to work our fall.
 This cunning courtier plans his own disgrace,
 And knows it not,—for he has yet to learn,
 We have a friend beside his sovereign's throne,
 Whose faith is pure, whose power exceeds his own,
 And who but waits a fitting hour, to wind
 Around his steps the snares himself has spread.
 But hither, from her presence, speeds one now.

[Enter Hatach.]

Mordecai. Welcome, good friend,
Thou art in truth no laggard messenger,—
Thy speed bespeaks glad news,—and naught save good,
I ever think to hear from her thou servest;
Then brief declare how heard she my request,
And has she yielded to my earnest prayer?

Hatach. Reverend sir,
My royal mistress greets thee by her slave,
Who, though unworthy to declare her will,
Bears to thine ear her words. She bids me say,
That by the Persian law, 't is death to stand
Uncalled before the king,—and thus she fears
Thy bidding to perform, lest from the doom
Decreed on all who rashly so offend,
She should not be exempt,—and losing life,
She should for ever lose the power to aid
The cause she loves. Therefore, she thee implores,
To counsel her, and guide her in some course
More safe for her, more full of hope for all,
By which she may avert impending ill.

Mordecai. Can she fear death in such a cause as
this?
Is she so blended with a pagan race
In this brief space of time, that she can stand,
Coldly and idly stand, while impious hands
Raze to the ground the altars of her God,
And offer as a bloody hecatomb
The remnant of her race? Degenerate one!
And has it come to this? indeed, to this?
I might have known as much, ere I had thrown
My stainless flower to breathe pollution's air.
There was a time, no power could daunt her heart,
Not death itself, in this most holy cause,—
And now the face of mortal man can shake
Her firm resolve. The slave of luxury
She yields to fear, though on her act depends
A nation's life!

Joatham. Oh spare, my brother, these reproachful
words!
The queen deserves them not,—to you she sends
For counsel and advice, nor shrinks from death

In Israel's cause, but fears to crush our hopes,
By throwing life away.

Hatach. Thy pardon that I speak,—but true those words,

And he who would gainsay them slanders much
Our beauteous queen; nor can he know aright
Her lofty soul, that scorns all homage base,
And shrinks from nought, when duty's voice commands.

Mordecai. So was it once,—so may it ever be!
And as a proof that she is still unchanged,
Still worthy of the race from whence she sprung,
That glorious race of kings, and prophets hoar,
And warlike men, who battled for the Lord,
Tell her, 'tis she who must avenge our wrongs,—
For this cause went she forth,—for this was raised
To greatness, by her God, to queenly power,—
And now she must stand forth, and nobly dare
Danger and death, if peril wears that form,
To compass her designs, and save from wo
The persecuted remnant of her race.

And tell her, too, nor spare one warning word,
That if by fear of mortal vengeance swayed,
Or if, with woman's weakness, clinging still
To that vain shadow, life,—she hesitates,
And tremblingly holds back her ready aid
From those who supplicate in vain for life,
Their blood, which she has suffered to be shed,
Shall cry to her aloud from the cold earth;
And dreary sights, and sounds of death and wo,
Shall float for ever round her like a dream,
Making her regal halls, her purple couch,
Like a dark sepulchre, and funeral pall!
Yea, in the midst of syren pleasure's voice,
Of love's fond dalliance, luxury's delights,
Her soul shall writhe with anguish unexpressed,—
And often in the silent midnight hour,
The voice of God shall thrill her startled ear,
Demanding stern the blood she might have spared,
And whispering words to sear her guilty soul.
I paint no fancied sketch,—full well I know
That those true worshippers, who in a land
Of dark idolatry bend the firm knee

To Israel's God alone, shall not be slain
 Unnoted, unavenged, by Him they serve.
 To work His sovereign will was Esther raised
 To such high eminence of power, and now
 The hour has come, when, like a champion brave,
 She should arise and gird her armor on,
 And sally forth to win the victor's meed.
 But if she falter in her duty high,
 Deliverance will come,—whence, none can know,—
 But surely it will come, and sudden too,
 O'erwhelming Esther, and her father's house,
 In one broad sea of wo !

Hatach. And must I bear unto my gracious queen
 All thou hast said ? Each stern and bitter word,
 To wound her gentle soul ?

Mordecai. I charge thee, *all !*
 Nor from mistaken love, one word omit.
 And yet I doubt her not as thou, perchance,
 Mayst deem I do, from all these warnings given.
 But she is young, and fair as opening rose,
 Whose tender heart the sly, foul canker-worm
 In secret taints, and poisons with his slime.
 And I am bound, as one who holds his faith
 More precious than his life, to see she prove
 No traitor to her God. 'T was I, thou knowest,
 Who for a holy end, approved by heaven,
 Exposed her to the perils of a court,—
 And it behoves me now to keep her pure
 From all that may corrupt her guileless heart.

Joatham. Remember thou, she wears a talisman
 Of mighty power against the assaults of earth,—
 Trust in her God, a pure and holy faith,
 Bright innocence, and such a love of truth
 As nought could ever shake.

Mordecai. Brother, the strong may fall, as erst did he
 Whom one Delilah with her honied words
 Lured to the gates of death. A thousand such
 Surround yon youthful queen, and in her ear
 Is poured the flatterer's tale, and she is lapped
 In soft delights that enervate the soul,
 Dimming the glory of that priceless gem
 With shadows caught from earth. Around her rise

From golden altars wreaths of sacrifice
 To gods, deemed false by us—and she is doomed
 From lips beloved ever to hear expressed
 The precepts of that faith we call accursed.
 Mid all these perils that beset her youth,
 Can it seem strange that I should fear for her,
 And watch, and pray, and utter warning word
 Frequent and stern, that she may falter not,
 But firmly hold the faith by Moses taught,
 And onward press in duty's narrow path,
 With ardent step, and purpose fixed and high?

Hatach. 'Tis thus she bears herself,—
 And from her faith, though known as yet to few,
 Ne'er turns aside; but every rite observes
 Thy law enjoins, and offers frequent prayers
 To him you serve, with all humility
 Of look and air.

Mordecai. Then take with thee my blessing to thy queen,
 And say to her, if still the sacred fire
 Of holy love burns brightly in her soul,
 She will arise, and like a queen go forth
 To seek her lord. Bid her dismiss, if still
 They lurk within, each abject fear of death,
 All dread of scorn or whispered calumny,
 That weighs upon her heart; and strong in faith,
 In her high purpose strong, bid her declare
 Before the throne the race from whence she sprang
 And for her people ask the monarch's grace.
 Let her do this, and God will smile on her,
 And round her throw His everlasting arms,
 Which can uphold her 'gainst an arm of flesh.
 I have nought else to say—depart in peace,
 And truly bear my message to the queen.

Hatach. I will with faithful tongue report thy words,
 And so farewell! [Exit *Hatach.*]

SCENE IX.—A garden. *Esther seen through the shrubbery, slowly pacing a verdant walk. Fatima and Zobeida follow at a distance.*

Fatima. She pauses now beside yon fountain's brink,
And bends her o'er its wave, as if to view
The radiant form reflected in its depths,—
Yet smiles she not,—nor kindles on her cheek
One flush of conscious vanity, at sight
Of her own charms, unrivalled as they are.
How sad she seems,—how bitterly she sighs,—
Were I a queen, methinks I ne'er should sigh,
Nor e'er know sorrow or regret again.

Zobeida. Ah, my Fatima, care will even creep
Within the circling diadem,—and wo
Will silent steal through the long train of slaves
And courtiers proud, that guard the monarch's throne.
Nay, smile not, girl, in mockery of my words,
Soon wouldest thou find them true,—ere thou hadst
borne
One weary day the crown's oppressive weight,
Thou 'dst long to tear it from thy aching brows,
And bind them with the fragrant lily wreath,
That doth encircle them so sweetly now.

Fatima. And yet, right willingly
Would I the pangs of royalty endure,
And be content to wear that frightful crown,
Within whose magic round, as thou dost feign,
Lurk all the ills that darken human life.
To be a queen, I would defy them all.

Zobeida. Nay, sigh not for such lot,—
Thou art a stranger to the touch of grief,
And every throb of thy young heart is joy,—
But she, our queen, so beautiful, so bright,
Gentle and tender as the turtle-dove,
That anxious sits amid the orange glade,
Listening to hear her mate's light pinion fan
The fragrant air,—she oftentimes sighs, and weeps,
Though at her feet earth's treasures are thrown down
With lavish hand, and though she is beloved

By a proud heart, and shares a mighty throne,
 Yet o'er her face, as o'er the summer moon,
 Clouds frequent pass, shading its lustre soft,
 And giving token that the azure sky
 Perchance may be o'ercast by coming storm.

Fatima. But yet she is a queen !
 And empress of a heart none else can sway,
 Though hundreds sigh to win its soft regard.

Zobeida. It is for *this* then thou wouldest be a queen ?
 But let *me* win such love without the throne,
 And he who proffered it, whate'er his state,
 It should with mine be linked in deathless bonds.
 Were he a shepherd youth, a Hebrew even,
 Still would I cling in life, in death to him.
 In some green vale we'd lead our tranquil hours,
 Tending our flocks, and daily guiding them
 At early dawn, or when the fragrant eve
 Stole silent on, to the cool fountain's brink,
 Pouring its waters sparkling from the rock,
 And tempting oft the weary traveller
 To quench his thirst in its pellucid wave.

Fatima. Thou canst not charm me with thy pastoral
 pipe !

Though sweet its tones, they cannot please my ear
 Like the soft breathing of the dulcet flute,
 That floats e'en now from yonder gorgeous dome.
 Thine be the rural life, with its tame joys,—
 Be mine earth's pageantries, the crown and throne,
 The mirror'd hall, the purple and the gold,
 With all the pomps that wait on royalty.
 But soft ! behold the queen,—she onward moves,
 And signs towards the palace—let us haste.

[*Exeunt, following the Queen.*

SCENE X.—*In the palace. Esther, Hatch, and Zobeida.*

Esther. And with these cruel doubts
 Were no kind words of love and blessing breathed ?

Hatch. Great queen, the truest love,
 That ever warmed a doting father's heart,
 Spake forth in all he said. Though stern his words

Ofttimes, and seeming harsh, 'twas plain to read,
 Through all he feared of ill, affection pure
 Working beneath, with giant strength and power,
 And frequent bursting forth in tenderest phrase
 That fondest love e'er framed.

Esther. Ah, it was ever thus he soothed my griefs,
 And healed my slightest wounds with the sweet balm
 Of love ! That trusting love I will repay
 E'en as he bids, without one anxious thought
 Of what may be the issue to myself.
 My people shall not die, if Esther's prayers
 May aught avail to save them from such fate,—
 Nor shall proud Haman triumph in his schemes ;
 The pent up whirlwind soon will burst in might,
 To hurl him to the earth.

Zobeida. Most gracious mistress, hear I thee aright
 Thou wilt not seek the king? 'T were certain death !?
 Tempt not his wrath,—trust me 't is terrible ;—
 Yea, fiercer than the rage of the roused lion,
 When the hunters chafe him !

Esther. Maiden, I know it well,—
 Though still to me his lips have ever breathed
 Affection's gentlest tones, I know, when vexed,
 He can send forth such words as smite with fear
 The hearer's inmost soul. Yet less I dread
 To dare his awful frown, than list that cry,
 That thrilling cry, which from their blood shall rise,
 Whom I have left to perish without aid.
 Yea, I will go,—and though his angry eyes
 May strike me to the earth, my dying breath
 Shall at his feet exhale, in earnest prayer
 For Israel's hapless race.

Zobeida. Beloved mistress, if thou art resolved
 To cast thy life, thy precious life away,
 Then I will follow thee, though 't is to death,
 Into that fearful presence—if thou goest,
 I too will go,—and if thou diest there,
 There will I lay me down and die with thee.

Esther. Take comfort, girl !
 The sun may burst athwart this heavy cloud,
 If He, who holds our lives, but wills it so!
 Ah, wouldst thou trust in Him who reigns o'er all,

Who feeds the winged denizens of air,
 And clothes in robes of more than royal pomp
 The fair and fragrant lilies of the field,
 Thou wouldest not start at all the petty ills
 Which menace human life, but full of faith,
 Leave all events to His controlling hand,
 Who with a Father's love appoints our steps.

Zobeida. My queen, thy faith can boast a wondrous power,
 To give thee solace in an hour so dark,
 And strength divine such duty to perform.

Esther. Most true, indeed! a power that earth knows not!

Without its aid my sinking heart would fail,
 But with each prayer its courage stronger grows.
 Maiden beloved, I would this faith were thine,—
 'T is this alone, mid life's tumultuous sea,
 Can give us strength to breast the billowy surge,
 And fearless ride o'er each foam-crested wave,
 To that bright shore, which beautiful and calm
 At distance shows its shadowy hills, and streams
 Of pure delight,—where unimagined joys
 And endless rest await the toil-worn heart.

Zobeida. Oh queen, what mean thy words?
 The glorious light of opening Paradise
 Shines on thy radiant face, and tells of bliss
 Which dawns not on my soul!

Esther. Maiden, 't is heaven's own light,
 Soon may its dawning beams illume thy soul
 With rays divine.—Anon, I'll teach thee more
 Of this high faith, and may it captive lead
 Thy willing mind, and spread its gentle sway
 O'er many a heart, which dark idolatry
 Now holds in bonds of ignorance and fear.

Zobeida. I have been wont ever to hear it cursed,
 Reviled with bitter words and ceaseless jeers;
 But yet, methinks, it doth possess a power
 Our faith hath never taught,—and I would learn
 The secret of that strength, which nerves thy heart
 With heavenly courage in an hour like this.

Esther. Maiden, if life is spared, thou shalt be taught

Whereon to lean in trouble's darkest hour,
 And find support. To feel, though earth deceive
 Thy eager grasp, there is with God a rest,
 Glorious and bright, where pleasures evermore
 Entrance the soul, undimmed by care or sin —
 This all-sufficient, all-enduring faith,
 Sustains me in this hour, and gives me strength
 To go where duty points ; content to die,
 If God ordains, yet with a lowly heart,
 Looking for aid, whence only it can come.
 Yea, in this moment when he hides His face,
 I will implore one little ray of light,
 To chase the gloom which lowers above my path.
 Hatach, return to Mordecai, and say
 It is my will that he declare a fast,
 And that with strict observance it be kept
 By all the Jews who here in Shushan dwell.
 In dust abased, and girt with sackcloth robes,
 From humble hearts let fervent prayers arise
 To Israel's God, that he will bless my act,
 And spare in mercy our devoted race.
 Three watchful nights, and three unwearied days,
 Bid them abstain from food, from sleep's soft balm,
 And from all interchange of tender joys,
 That sweeten life and soften human wo.
 I and my maidens will observe the same
 With strictest care, nor in one trivial act
 Depart from the performance of the law.
 • Trusting that God will hear his people's cry,
 On the third morning I will rise assured,
 Doff the coarse robe of penitence and grief,
 And, once again, as best beseems a queen,
 Arrayed in purple, and adorned with gold,
 Will seek unawed the king, and cast myself
 With fearless heart upon his sovereign grace.
 Great as he is, our God is greater far,—
 He is a king—our God is King of kings,
 And the sole arbiter of life and death.
 Thou hast thy errand, speed, and bear it hence.
 And thou, Zobeida, for this solemn fast
 Make preparations due, and warn my maids
 Of that which I command.

[*Exeunt.*

ACT III.

SCENE I.—A court of the palace. The King in his royal robes, seated upon the throne. Around him stand the princes and nobles of his empire. A crowd of people of all ranks throng the court. The King turns towards Memucan, who stands at his left hand, and addresses him in a low voice.

Ahasuerus. Didst thou not say, my lord,
That for some days the Queen a fast has held?

Mamucan. I did, most gracious king—
She with her maiden train. So Hatach said:
But named no cause, why one so pure in soul
Bowed down herself in such abasement low,
E'en at the footstool of the righteous gods.

Ahasuerus. 'T is strange, in truth—yet she may have
a vow
That duly binds her to this humble act—
Or else, perchance, she mourns my long neglect,—
If such she deem my absence from her sight,
Protracted still beyond my wish or will—
But the great gods, who read my secret heart,
Know that it throbs with more than woman's love,
At thought of her—my soul's supreme delight.
Full well thou know'st, after the toils of war,
Peace brings but troubled rest; for every tongue
Breathes forth its wrongs, all claim the monarch's ear—
And here, like fettered slave, for many days,
Aye, long and weary days, love's light shut out—
I've patient sat, listening the murmur loud
That from yon restless mass, watching my glance,
Breaks ever on my ear, like ocean's waves
In one continuous sound. But see, my lord,
Again they throng—the heaving multitude
Each moment swells, and presses near the throne,
As if to hurl their sovereign from his seat,
Should he neglect their cry! This day, for them—
To-morrow, farewell care—love claims it all!

Haman (aside with an impatient look.)
 [I'll make an end of this long conference,
 I like it not—there's poison 'neath the tongue
 Of that proud Memucan, may work me harm.]
 Great king, one waits to gain thy gracious ear,
 Who long has served thee with a faithful heart,
 And now would ask redress for deepest wrong,
 Done by a vengeful and oppressive Jew,
 'Gainst—

Ahasuerus. Bid him approach, and may the righteous
 gods
 Blast that false race ! But soft ! what radiant shape
 Glides, goddess-like through yon unclosing door ?
 How beautiful ! how fair ! too fair for earth !
 How bright the blush that mantles on her cheek !
 Like the soft glow caught from yon roseate cloud,
 That now has wafted to our dazzled sight
 This messenger of heaven ! Can it be so ?
 Or, princes, say if it indeed be she,
 Our kingdom's pride, the glory of our crown,
 Who treads our courts with such a shrinking step,
 Yet with most queenly grace ! Why comes she here,
 Bringing those wondrous charms, to feast the gaze
 Of vulgar eyes ? Now, by the gods we serve,
 This is a mystery we fain would solve—
 Queen Vashti scorned us, when we summoned her,
 And fell beneath our wrath—yet now, forsooth,
 Our chosen queen and bride defies our laws ;
 And in an hour when busy crowds surround,
 And we are chafed with all an empire's cares,
 She comes uncalled, and stands before our throne,
 As though she'd dare us to exert our power
 And give her her deserts !

(All present stand gazing in mute amazement, while
Esther, wearing a crown, and splendidly attired, advances through the spacious court towards the throne. She leans upon Zobeida, and Fatima bears her train. As she approaches the king, whose countenance gradually becomes stern as he gazes upon her, she falters, and as the last words he utters fall upon her ear, she turns pale and leans heavily upon her attendant.)
Memucan, [in alarm]

Great king, she fears thy frown ! she faints ! she dies !
Stretch forth thy sceptre, life is in its touch !

(*Esther swoons and falls into the arms of Zobeida. The King hastily extends the sceptre, exclaiming in an agitated voice :)*

Fear not, my queen ! alas, alas, she falls !
I, merciless, have killed her with my frown !

(*He leaps from his throne, rushes towards her, and taking her in his arms endeavors to rouse her with soothing words.)*

My queen ! my love !

Bright matchless flower, blighted by angry clouds,
Lift up thy head, and with one gentle smile
Dispel my fears—why droop'st thou, radiant bird ?
Awake, awake, thy lord, thy king implores,
With the deep earnestness of fearful love.—
Ha ! she revives ! again those azure veins
Glow with life's crimson tide, the snowy lid
Is gently quivering o'er those lustrous eyes,
And the full lips shame, with their roseate hue
And perfumed breath, the flower that Persia loves.
I hold her yet in life, thanks to the gods !
And now, fair queen, let terror be dispelled,
He who adores thee clasps thee to his heart,
And urges thee to pour into his ear
Thy secret wish—pledging his royal word
To grant thee all, though thou dost ask for half
His kingdom's wealth.

Esther [slides from his arms and falls at his feet.]

My lord ! my king ! dread sovereign of my fate !
Forgive my fears—but when my trembling eye
Met the full terrors of thy kingly brow,
For judgment armed, in majesty arrayed—
I sank o'erpowered beneath its dreadful light,
And o'er my senses such a faintness stole,
I thought it death—nor ever hoped to wake
On earth again—and least of all, I dreamed
That I should lie within thy circling arms,
And be recalled once more to life and love,
By the fond murmurs of that soothing voice,

Whose single word might have decreed my doom,
For trespass done to-day—too well deserved—
And deemed most just—by heart less soft than thine.

Ahasuerus. He were a wretch indeed, to stain his hand

With blood of one like thee—so pure, so fair,
Young, bright, and innocent ! then tremble not,
My smile is on thee, can it not restore
The banished rose that bloomed upon thy cheek ?
Fear should not chase it thence—for see, my love,
The golden sceptre rests upon thy neck,
Sure pledge of amity and tender peace—
And with a sovereign's and a husband's love,
My arm sustains, and ever shall defend
Thy precious life—then wherefore, dearest, fear ?
What pales that cheek, why drops that fringed lid,
And why in murmurs faint, fall the soft tones
Of that love-breathing voice ?

Esther. Oh, can I e'er repay such noble love,
Such generous care, for life so poor as mine ?
I have risked all—life, love, and happiness,
To venture here uncalled—for many days
Weary and sad have passed since last I gazed
Upon thy face beloved—and on my ear
Have fallen many sounds of joy and wo,
But not that gentle voice more dear than all.

And now I come—

Ahasuerus. And welcome art thou, bright and peerless one !

Though in the presence of our wondering court
Thou hast defied a law ne'er scorned till now,
Still art thou welcome, treasure of my life !
And for thy wish—urge it without a fear.
Thou hast a secret one, I see it well—
And it is thine, though thou dost ask thy lord,
E'en in the face of this mute, gazing crowd,
To cast his diadem beneath thy feet,
And own himself in person, as in heart,
Thy abject slave.

Esther. Not so, my noble lord !
Thy pride is mine, nor would I ask thee aught,
That could in others' eyes, or in thine own,

Raise one debasing thought. I crave but this—
 And this, with trembling heart—that thou wilt come,
 Thou and prince Haman, to the banquet spread,
 This day, for thee and him. There shall my hand
 The goblet crown for thee—and there shall song
 And minstrel lay, such as thou lovest well,
 Gush forth to charm thine ear, and win thy soul,
 To lose awhile in its entrancing strains
 The cares which chain thee to an empire's wheels,
 Making thee truant to each gentle thought,
 Which love and friendship claim.

Ahasuerus. And thou, dear one, for this most slight
 request

Hast e'en adventured life ! I owe thee much,
 Yea more than twenty lives, for love so true !
 And for thy fond request—'t will give me joy
 To sit with thee at the same banquet board,
 Watching the rosy beauty of thy smile,
 Charmed by the music of that angel voice,
 More full of harmony than golden lyres,
 And from beneath the dark and fringed lids
 Catching the liquid beams of the soft eye,
 Radiant with love's most pure and holy light ;
 I will be there—and Haman too, fair queen,
 A proud and honored guest, shall share with me
 The tempting dainties of thy regal board.
 And now, farewell, till then. We are a mark
 To every eye around. Draw close thy veil,
 I would not have those matchless charms exposed
 To common gaze—they marvel much, no doubt,—
 But vain their silence, and their bending heads,
 Our low-breathed tones reach not their listening ears.
 Farewell beloved, thy maidens wait thy word
 To guard thee hence. We meet again ere long.

[*Exeunt queen and attendants.*

Ahasuerus. Disperse the people, Memucan.
 No longer audience I hold to-day.
 Love claims it all, and not a care shall rise,
 Like envious clouds, to shade its sunny sky.
 Haman, thy queen has greatly honored thee,
 For thee alone, of all who round me stand,
 She bids to grace the feast spread for her lord.

Deserve these favors, and thou shalt be blest.
 Attend us, lords, while we retire a space,
 To doff this gorgeous crown, these cumbrous robes,
 For garb more light, and gracefully adorned,
 Beseeching more a feast, and wrought to please
 Fair woman's practised eye.

(*A flourish of trumpets.*)
 [Exeunt king, lords, and attendants.]

SCENE II.—*In the palace. Esther reclining upon a couch. Zobeida kneeling on a cushion beside her.*

Zobeida. Thanks to the gods, this dreadful day is o'er.
 Thy fearful task is done—and thou, my queen,
 Art safe escaped from all our hearts foretold
 Of coming ill—dark auguries, and false.

Esther. Oh, my Zobeida, I can scarce believe
 What I have boldly dared. Alone, uncalled,
 To tread that crowded court, and meet the gaze
 Of Persia's sovereign lord, in power arrayed,
 And armed to give his fiat to each law,
 Deemed just and right.

Zobeida. It was a fearful hour—and when, my queen,
 Thou sunk'st o'erpowered within my trembling arms,
 I thought thy sweet life gone, and felt indeed,
 That we had cast ourselves to certain death,
 Where there were none to pity, none to save.

Esther. And, maiden, if beneath that eagle glance
 Thy quailing heart grew faint, dost deem it strange
My tongue was mute, my fleeting senses failed?
 Or when recalled by words of gentlest tone,
 I shrank to utter the avowal bold,
 That she, he cherished, was of Jewish race,
 E'en one of those, 'gainst whom with curses stern
 His vengeance was denounced—or that I feared
 In such an hour to plead my desperate cause?
 All eyes were on me—speech and thought were chained,
 And in the strong emotion which o'erpowered,
 I did but make one seeming light request,
 That he, my lord, would grace my feast to-day,

And with him bring prince Haman, that proud foe
To our poor race. They came, Zobeida.

Zobeida. And thou for Israel

At the banquet plead?

Esther. No, maiden, no—hour after hour passed on,
But no kind moment came when I could say,
“Spare my devoted people”—on my tongue
The words still hovered ready to burst forth
In earnest utterance; yet, I shame to say,
Fear paralyzed my soul; and when the king
Urged me with pressing word to make request
Of aught I might desire—I did but ask
That he, with Haman on the coming day,
Again would grace my board. Then, mighty God,
Send me thy strength my task to execute!
Thou hast upheld me through this trying day,
E'en thou, my father's God, whose throne is heaven,
Whose foot-stool is the earth, in thee I trust,
Nor fear what man can do. Late wears the night,
Go, maiden, seek repose—I too would sleep.

SCENE III.—*In the house of Haman. Haman, Zeresh,
and Adalia, their son.*

Zeresh. What thus has moved my lord? why lowers
his eye,
As though 't were gazing on a thing of hate—
And wherefore o'er his brow gather dark clouds,
Presaging gloom and woe?

Haman. Wherefore indeed should cloud or transient
shade
Sadden the brightness of my honored brow?
Or why should care, or thought of human ill
Drug with one bitter draught my cup of bliss?
High as I soared I have achieved my aim,
Nor paused, nor faltered in my upward flight,
Though 't was o'er lofty heads, that now unveiled
Yield homage to my might. Proudly I stand
Beside my king—e'en on the highest step
Beneath the throne. She too, our beauteous queen,
That peerless one, our sovereign's pride and boast,

Greets me with gracious smiles, and welcome fair,
As one whom she would honor most of all,
Next her high lord.

Adalia. That matchless flower ! Ah, hold discourse
of her,

And ne'er shall pall the sounds upon my ear !
Never, my father, gazed I on such charms !
Such angel beauty never dawned before,
E'en in the sweet delirium of a dream,
Upon my raptured soul. How beautiful
She looked, how meek amid her royalty,
When in that crowded court this morn she knelt
A lowly suppliant, where she might command—
For born she seems to sway all human hearts.
Each eye which on her gazed full surely deemed
That paradise had opened, and sent forth
A form divine, radiant with heaven's own light.
A burst of murmured praise followed the calm
Of wonder and delight—no tongue was mute ;
E'en the dark Jews, those unbelieving dogs,
Called on their God to bless the lovely queen !

Haman. Their God, saidst thou !
And if indeed he live, may his dire curse
Smite like a two-edged sword, the impious race—
And when they call upon His name to save,
Then may he mock them in their agony,
And none be nigh to aid ! Oh, righteous gods,
Speed, speed the hour when vengeance may be mine,
A brimming draught—for which my soul's athirst.

Adalia. My father, heed them not—a cursed race,
Not worthy thus to move thy sober thought.
Choose thou a softer theme—to day thou'st sat
At a gay banquet with the peerless queen—
And we would fain learn, if in secret bower
She looks as fair, and has such power to charm ;
For by some witching spell she chains my thought,
A spell too sweet to break.

Haman. Thou fall'st an easy prey to a bright smile—
Yet if of her thou 'dst hear, listen, and know—
This queen, this royal gem, this wonder fair,
That has entranced thee by a moment's glance,
Honors thy father, asks him to her feasts,

And him alone of all in Shushan's courts,
 Her lord beside. Still linger on his ear
 The silver tones, and on his eye the smile,
 With which she pledged him in a luscious draught
 Of sparkling wine, that danced within the cup,
 Mocking the radiance of the clustered gems
 Around its rim, embedded deep in gold.
 Nor yet this honor vast enough she deems,
 But on the coming day again commands
 My presence at the banquet with her lord.
 Yet even there, though conscious of my power,
 Conscious I am in all, save name, a king,
 The purple spread around me, and the blaze
 Of countless gems dazzling my aching sight—
 While sweetest strains of witching minstrelsy
 Entrance my ravished ear, and round me stand
 Obsequious slaves appalled gorgeously,
 Anxious to minister with zealous hand
 To every wish—yea, even there, a thought,
 A withering thought, dwells ever in my heart,
 Spreading its pall funereal o'er each joy,
 Saddening the festive scene, and blotting out
 Its proud delights, by one unceasing pang
 Of rage, resentment, hatred, and disdain,
 That gnaws unceasing like a vulture foul
 E'en at the very roots of all my bliss !

Adalia. Sure thou dost tempt the gods with thoughts
 like these !

Thou, who art crowned with all thou hast desired,
 Shouldst wear a face of smiles, a soul replete
 With deep emotion, gushing forth in streams
 Of grateful joy.

Zeresh. It should be so—but yet, methinks, my son,
 Thy father wearies of his prosperous state,
 His bark has borne him o'er a waveless sea
 E'en to the haven of his fond desires—
 And now in very idleness of thought
 He fancies shapes of gloom and coming ill,
 And woos the gods to send him what he dreads.

Haman. Nay, mock me not ! I see no fancied ill
 Flickering with idle warning in my path,
 To cast its shadow o'er my sunlit view—

The ill I dread is here—a tangible
 And ever present thing, that blights my joys,
 And sends the life-blood of my throbbing heart,
 Coursing like fire, through all my burning veins.
 Aye, gaze in wonder on my moody brow,
 Yet hear my words—high as my hopes have soared,
 E'en had they dared a higher, loftier flight,
 And from my sovereign's brows have clutched the
 crown,
 With hand profane, to place it on my own—
 If in such act successful I had been,
 And looked, and moved, in very truth a king ;
 E'en in the glory of that high estate,
 This curse would haunt me still. Where were my
 peace,
 E'en as a monarch hailed, and robed, and crowned,
 Like those who bear o'er earth unbounded sway,—
 If I must brook the proud unbending glance
 Of that dark Jew, who sits at Shushan's gate
 Scowling disdain—nor e'er by word, or look,
 Or gesture meet, renders the homage due
 My princely state.

Zeresh. Be calm, my lord, I pray ;
 Soon will this worm be crushed, that rears itself
 From out its kindred dust, to aim its fangs,
 Innocuous though they be, at thy proud head.
 A speedy vengeance wakes—fast comes the hour,
 When from their scabbards forth shall leap to light
 Ten thousand blades, thirsting to drink the blood
 Of this foul race, whom heaven and earth abhor.

Haman. Low may they lie !
 While the black raven o'er them flaps her wing
 And calls her clamorous brood with boding cry,
 To share the feast obscene. Wherefore, ye gods,
 Delay this wished-for hour? why doom me still
 To be the mark of scorn to this base Jew ?
 Aye even now, as from the feast I passed,
 There did he sit with eyes upraised to heaven,
 And clasped hands, as if in mockery
 To the immortal gods. All bent before me—
 And the clear welkin rang with piercing shouts,
 Wafting to Haman long and loud acclaim,

Such as is wont to greet a monarch's ear,
 From subjects dutiful, and filled with love.
 But mute that traitor's lips—firm and unmoved
 The accursed Hebrew sat, nor deigned one glance
 On him, at whose proud feet proud princes knelt,
 Veiling their brows in dust. How boiled my blood
 At his insulting scorn ! How panted I
 To hurl him to the earth with this strong arm,
 And trample 'neath my feet his recreant soul !
 Yet mad with hate, and burning for revenge,
 Bland were my smiles, frequent and low I bent
 With courteous air to the admiring throng—
 And hastened hither your advice to crave,
 Touching the vengeance we may best devise
 For wretch so base.

Adalia. Death ! instant death ! bitter and cruel too,
 And be it armed with pangs unknown till now,
 Still is it all too lenient for his crime,
 Too merciful by far for his deserts.

Zeresh. Thou hast said well, my son—let the Jew
 die—
 Yet would I not thy father's spotless sword
 Should e'er be tarnished with the sordid blood
 Of low-born slave like this. High let him wave
 Between yon azure arch and the green earth,
 He has so long defiled. A gibbet raise
 Mighty and black, whereon his naked limbs
 Shall swing in rude accordance with the winds,
 Till nought remains but the grim skeleton
 Of what he was. And now depart, my lord—
 Receive my counsel, hasten to the king,
 And gain permission for this just revenge.

Haman. Madam, I go, for thou hast proved thyself
 An able counsellor ; meanwhile, my son,
 To thy direction all things I entrust,
 Which may the speedy consummation work
 Of our intent. Haste thee and summon men
 To hew from out some tall and lofty tree
 The gibbet horrible, ordained to bear
 The loathsome carcass of this hated Jew.
 High let it rise toward the frowning heavens,
 Full fifty cubits from the solid earth,

That, as in death the wretched Hebrew writhes,
 Each upturned eye may mock his agonies,
 And gaze with tearless scorn upon his pangs.
 The night wanes fast—you, who can sweetly sleep,
 Court its bland power; I seek the palace courts,
 To wait the first awakening of my king.

[*Exit Haman.*

SCENE IV.—*In the palace.—The king reclining on a couch. Beside him Memucan.*

Ahasuerus. My spirit faints with weariness,
 Yet on my eyes sleep's soft and balmy dews
 Fall not as they are wont, at this still hour,
 Sealing my senses in most sweet repose,
 And calling up by some mysterious power
 A throng of shining forms, a pageant rare
 To charm my tranced soul.

Memucan. Perchance, my king, the vision of the morn
 Still sheds its radiance o'er thy sleepless lids,
 And charms them from repose. What eye that gazed
 On that resplendent form, beaming with youth
 And more than mortal grace, would wish to close,
 And shut the glorious vision from its sight?

Ahasuerus. Aye, of my wakeful mood thou read'st
 the cause,
 And with a cunning heart thy glowing words
 Sweep o'er my soul, awaking every chord
 To a wild burst of melody and love.
 E'en as the fingers of some gifted bard,
 Straying at will among the silent strings,
 By master touches causes them to speak
 In thrilling sounds of harmony divine.

Memucan. My gracious lord, shall I pursue the theme,
 And strive with colors caught from heaven's bright
 bow,
 To weave a tissue rare of glorious hues,
 Bearing some faint resemblance to that dream—
 For such it seemed—too exquisite for earth—
 Which dawned with matchless beauty on our eyes,
 In yon wide court—wearing such shape divine,

Such beauteous combination of all charms,
 And breathing forth such grace ineffable,
 As only forms in paradise can boast,
 Who quaff the nectar of immortal life,
 And bathe in streams, whose pure transparent flood
 Gives to those blessed ones eternal youth,
 Unfading, as the golden amaranth,
 That binds their radiant brows.

Ahasuerus. Nay, cease, my lord—
 E'en with oppressive power her loveliness
 Falls on my soul—'t is she has banished sleep—
 She hovers round me with her angel smile,
 And in the gentle breeze, that stirs the flowers
 And shakes from out their cups the perfumed dew,
 I hear her whispered voice, feel her pure breath,
 And start ere sleep has quite enchain'd my soul,
 To clasp my loved one to my throbbing breast.
 So wears the night—though past the middle watch
 Ere I her presence left. Now let me sleep,
 For nature needs repose, and sterner cares
 Than those imposed by love will claim my thought,
 Soon as the morrow dawns. E'en now it breaks—
 I feel the freshening breeze, hear matin songs,
 And see the ruddy blush of orient morn
 Kindling the sky. I am but ill refreshed—
 Not nerved to grasp again an empire's reins—
 Yet must I on—envying the veriest slave,
 Who rises blithely from his bed of leaves,
 Where he has slept that deep and dreamless sleep,
 Which seldom visiteth a royal couch.

Memucan. Perchance, my king, music's entrancing
 strains
 May soothe thy soul, and woo to soft repose.
 Without, thy minstrels wait, thy chosen band,
 With harp and lute — may I not summon them,
 To charm thy wearied ear, and chase afar
 The demon of unrest?

Ahasuerus. Aye, bid them seek yon marble corridor,
 And there exert their skill—I love such sounds
 At distance best—winding through high arcades
 And pillared halls, still gathering softness
 As they onward creep, and blend their breathings

With the fountain's flow, and with the perfumes
 That around distil from herb and flower,
 Till every whispered breeze that fans the cheek
 Seems redolent of sound—etherial sound,
 Sweet as the odors on which it is borne.

*(Memucan gives directions to the minstrels, and re-
 enters. Music is heard in the distance.)*

Ahasuerus. 'T is ravishing, my lord !
 And now, one favor more—still canst thou bear
 With thy unquiet mood, I pray thee bring,
 From yonder antique cabinet inwrought with gold,
 And bearing on its front strange characters,
 Traced by the hand of dark Egyptian seer
 In gems of living light—bring forth from thence
 A volume huge, wherein thou 'lt written find
 The records of our realm—read, if thou wilt,
 And I will hear, since sleep still flies my couch,
 The deeds of years gone by.

Memucan. Great king, a happy thought—
 Glorious those annals, and each splendid page
 Will charm thy spirit's restlessness, and wake
 The high-born pride of thy illustrious race.

*(He brings the book, places himself near the king, and
 reads in a low voice.)*

*Ahasuerus, (listening attentively, then suddenly inter-
 rupting him,) (*

Aye, Artahonus ; well do I recall
 That gifted man. He served me well and long,
 And now on fair Euphrates' distant bank
 Bears regal sway over a province wide—
 A small reward for service such as his.

*(Memucan resumes his reading--after a few moments
 the king again interrupts him.)*

Ahasuerus. What of Hycanes ?
 Oh, I mind me now. In a fierce hunt
 He slew an angry boar that would have gor'd
 Our steed. A palace, and a score of milk white steeds
 All richly housed, repaid him well. Go on.

(He proceeds, and shortly the king again speaks.)

What read'st thou now?
 Scarce on my ear thy low-breathed accents fall,
 And yet, methinks amid the murmured sounds
 I catch a name I should remember well.

Memucan. 'T is of that foul conspiracy, oh king,
 The record is—wherein thy life was saved,
 By intervention of a friendly Jew,
 Who—

Ahasuerus. Aye, Mordecai his name—
 I do remember all—the wretches suffered
 For their purposed crime—was it not so?

Memucan. It was, my king;
 So may all traitors perish!

Ahasuerus. And what reward has Mordecai received,
 For this great service done his lord and king?

Mumucan. Alas, I fear 't is unrequited still—
 Here stands the deed recorded by thy scribe,
 But midst a multitude of kingly cares,
 The Jew forgotten lives.

Ahasuerus (*starting from his couch.*)
 Shades of my fathers! am I thus ingrate?
 I, who am termed most merciful, most just,
 Generous, and kind, and gracious unto all:
 Alas, I'm none of these—I bear a life,
 Preserved from peril by a nobler man,
 Who owed me nought—and him I have repaid
 With cold unthankfulness, but ill deserved.

Memucan. Nay, gracious king, these are accusing
 words
 To heap unsparing where there is no sin—
 Reproach thy servants for this sad neglect,
 Thou hast a nation's care, a nation's weal
 To fill thy thought.—We are the guilty ones,
 And should have been most earnest to obtain
 Some princely favor for that generous man
 Who saved a life so dear.

Ahasuerus. Thou canst not salve my conscience with
 soft words,
 For between that and me is deadly war,
 Till I have made atonement for my fault.
 This hour it shall be done—this very hour
 The highest honor in my kingly gift

Shall be bestowed, and with a grateful heart,
On him I long have wronged—my life's preserver,
And henceforth my friend. Summon my peers,
And see who waits without.

[*Exit Memucan.*]

Ahasuerus (solus.) I am a king—yet frail, and weak indeed,
And prone to err as is the meanest slave,
Who waits a suppliant at my palace gates.—
This is a humbling thought for kingly pride,
But meant, no doubt, by the immortal gods
To teach me my dependence on their care,
And make me feel I only am a man,
Though worshipped, like themselves, with incense sweet
Of praise, and homage low.

(*Re-enter Memucan, with Haman, Admatha, and Marsena.*)

Ahasuerus. Welcome, brave hearts,
We need your counsel much—though strange the hour
Your presence to demand, since the faint dawn
Yet struggles with the mists of parting night,
Unwilling to resign her ebon sway.
But we have pressing matter on our mind,
That banished sleep, and would not brook delay.
Therefore we summoned you, and greet you fair,
And ask your prompt reply to word of ours,
Touching a purpose we have much at heart.

Haman. Great king, thy servants humbly wait thy will,
Ready with heart and life to serve thy cause,
And yield obedience to thy high command.

Ahasuerus. Thou speak'st for all, and all I thank for this,
Yet trust so far to thy tried zeal and love
That I would question thee, and answer claim
Of what reward, worthy a king to give,
Should be bestowed on that deserving man,
Whom 'tis his sovereign's pleasure to exalt,
And with high honor crown.

Haman (aside with an air of self-congratulation.)

(Now aid me, gods! my hour of triumph comes!)

(Aloud)

Whate'er best pleaseth thee, my gracious king,
For e'en the meanest of thy royal gifts
Exceed by far the merits of thy slaves.

Ahasuerus. Nay, rack invention, search the cells of thought,

Some honor to devise unknown before—

I would bestow it lavishly on one

To whom I'm deeply bound, and like a king

Requite the debt I owe. Free be thy speech,

And let the guerdon thou dost name be rare,

Such as not frequent royal hand confers,

E'en on the most beloved and favored ones.

Speak then as 't were for thy own first-born son,

Or for thyself—the gifts I meditate—

And thou wilt speak aright.

Haman (aside with triumphant pleasure.)

(I am the man! there needs no stronger proof

Than what these words imply. 'Tis for myself

To snatch the glory proffered to my grasp,

And thus I seize it with a fearless hand.)

(Aloud)

Happy the man, great king, on whom descends

Thy gracious love, reward most pure and dear.

But since thou bid'st me speak, I counsel thus;

Let him, whom thou wouldest honor and exalt

Above each proud compeer, be in thy robe

Arrayed, and let the gorgeous diadem,

Which glitters on thy brow, encircle his;—

Thus royally apparelled let thy steed,

That curbs his proud neck to thy princely hand,

As scorning one less high, let this bright steed,

In all his rich caparisons bedecked

Forth from his stall be brought, for him to ride,

That happy man most honored by his king.

Still farther to express thy royal love,

Let one, the noblest of that princely band

Who stand around thy throne, lend willing aid

To deck this favored one—his robes arrange,

The golden stirrups hold, the courser curb,

While up the favorite mounts in regal state.

Then bid the courtier grasp the silken rein,
 Nor scorn to lead through Shushan's crowded streets,
 The horse and rider, still proclaiming loud,
 With voice distinct—' Come and behold the man,
 All ye who wondering gaze, the favored man,
 Our king with honor most delights to crown !'
 This is thy servant's counsel, and though weak,
 May it, my king, grace and acceptance find.

Admatha, (speaks aside to Memucan.)

Mark thou his insolence !

The cunning hypocrite, who inly gloats
 That self he now exalts, and thou, or I,
 Beneath whose very feet he grovelled once,
 Shall be entrapped by his most cunning words
 Into an act, debasing beyond thought
 To high-born souls like ours ; but which at once
 Exalts above our heads this upstart wretch,
 Who aims to pluck all honors for himself.

Memucan. Patience awhile, and thou shalt see his fall.

Vainly he thinks to triumph—for his feet
 He weaves a subtle snare—'t is meant for us,
 But in his boastful heart ne'er springs the thought
 That he may fall, to his own schemes a prey.
 How will he gnash his teeth with inward rage,
 When he shall learn it is the hated Jew
 He honors thus—himself alone debased !

Ahasuerus. My lords, your counsel yield—speak not apart,

For well advisedly I fain would act.
 You both have heard, then say if you approve
 The words of this most wise and potent prince ;
 Or if there's aught you still can recommend,
 More honor to confer—speak and 'tis done.

Memucan. We but applaud his words, oh mighty king,
 And nought can add to counsel so mature.

Ahasuerus. Then hear, prince Haman—thee I chief address

As next my throne, and one whose counsel wise
 I most esteem—likewise, as being one
 Who in the payment of this mighty debt,
 By which thy sovereign's honor stands redeemed,

Art destined to perform a part conspicuous,
By thyself prescribed.

Haman (in a tone of affected humility.)
Oh gracious king, may I thy love deserve,
That bounteous love which crowns my life with gifts,
Better bestowed on those of better worth,
But not more honest heart.

Ahasuerus. Nay, in thy gratitude be not profuse,
Till thou hast learned my purpose and thy task.
Rememberest thou the Jew called Mordecai,
Who from a murderous plot, basely designed,
Saved my devoted life?

Haman (becomes pale and agitated.)
I know him well, oh king.

And ne'er—

Ahasuerus. Yet hear me speak:
That service done me was but ill repaid;
Nay, it was quite o'erlooked, till on this night,
When courting sleep in vain, and ill at ease,
I bade prince Memucan bring forth yon book,
Where of my realm the acts recorded stand,
And there the deed was writ in letters bright,
Casting a stain upon my royal name,
And in my conscience planting a sharp thorn,
That pierced me through with shame and deep remorse.
How could I rest, bowed down with sin like this?
Straight I arose, and counsel asked in haste,
Resolved to shower on this neglected Jew
The highest honors in my power to grant,
Of that thou hast advised I well approve,
And thee commission to observe all done,
To the minutest detail thou hast named.

Haman (in extreme agitation, while Memucan and Amatha exchange significant smiles and glances.)

On him, my king, this vile and abject Jew
Wilt thou bestow such honor as beseems .
A prince alone? oh, surely not on him,
This outcast wretch, wilt thou confer such grace!

Ahasuerus. Why not on him, if he doth merit it?
What matters it to me, who saved my life?
The deed's the same, come from what source it will,
And I am deeply bounden to repay

The precious boon with heartfelt gratitude,
And princely gifts. What signifies to me
His name or race? A dark-browed Ethiop
Glittering with the spoils of his rich land—
Or haughty Jew boasting his high descent,
Yet scorned of all—I would that none should say
Persia's proud monarch wears a thankless heart.

Haman. Pardon, great king!
Speak but thy sovereign will, and it is done.

Ahasuerus. And we would have it so—
Take then my robes, my crown, my stately steed,
And haste to Mordecai—to him make known
Our royal will, which thus exalteth him.
And when at length in regal pomp arrayed,
And proudly mounted on our favorite steed,
Grasp thou the jewelled rein, and lead him forth
Through Shushan's streets, proclaiming loud and long,
'Come and behold the man, whom most our king
Delights to crown and honor with his love!'

(*Haman makes a profound obeisance and precipitately retires.*)

Memucan (aside to Admatha.) The gods are just!
They send the wicked ever their deserts!
Saw you his look of rage? How his eyes glared,
Like a fierce tiger's, baffled of its prey,
Yet bent on fell revenge?

Admatha. I marked it well—and with exulting joy
Beheld the struggles of his smothered wrath.
His ruin has commenced—the toils he wove
To snare another are around himself—
Aid or escape is vain.

Ahasuerus. Why commune with yourselves apart,
my lords?
We have done well you say—'t was so we meant—
At least the accusing spirit far has fled,
And left us light of heart. Come now with us
To yonder terraced height, shaded and cool,
Which overlooks the street of caravans,
Whence we may see the glittering pageant pass,
And by our presence show that we approve.

[*Exeunt king, lords, and attendants.*

SCENE V.—*The house of Haman.*

(Enter Haman, Zeresh, Adalia.)

Haman. Yes, on myself I brought this sentence dire !
Myself I doomed to shame—with evil tongue
Uttering base counsel, in the hope to soar
In haughty triumph o'er my prostrate foes.

Zeresh. The gods rebuke thee for o'erweening pride—
Be warned in time, nor tempt their vengeance more.

Haman. They have abased me low, yet humbled not
That soaring mind, death can alone subdue.
For fame I've lived, for honors and renown,
But they are trifles all, compared with that
One master passion, which absorbs my soul,
Revenge ! its name—aye, on that hated Jew—
My life's dark bane, the source of all my woe.
Yet from my lips accursed came forth the doom,
That raised him o'er myself. He royally
Arrayed in triumph rode, while I, a prince,
His adversary sworn, led forth his steed,
Proclaiming honors on his hated head !

Zeresh. Ah, woe is me, that I should live to hear,
And thou to tell such tale !

Haman. And then proud Memucan, my secret foe,
And dark Admatha, with his envious soul,
How did they triumph in my deep disgrace !
Affecting sympathy to hide their joy,
And veil their insults with a softer name.

Adalia. Ah me, methinks our ruin has commenced,
The honors done this Jew have raised the hopes
Of all who dwell within the city's space.
Glad songs of joy from every house resound,
And maidens haste with offerings to their God,
While triumph beams from every Hebrew brow.

Zeresh. I fear indeed we fall before this Jew,
The king protects him—e'en the gods appear
To aid his cause—and can we then prevail ?

Haman. Yea, and I will, or perish in his stead—
The fatal tree which towers within yon court,
Has not been hewn in vain. This very night
I shall entreat the king to sign the act,

Decreeing him to death. I've framed a tale,
 The monarch cannot doubt, e'en were his mind
 In its most lucid state—which 't will not be,
 When he has left the banquet of the queen,
 Whose golden goblets, sparkling to their brim,
 Invite him not in vain.

Adalia. My father, then besiege him with thy prayers,
 Let not this Jew escape, or we are lost,
 Cast from our lofty height, to lowest depths
 Of infamy and shame. But see, they come,
 The king's high chamberlains, to bear thee hence,
 Where feast and song abound, and the bright queen
 Dispenses light and love.

(Enter *Harbana, Æratheus, and others.*)

Harbana. Our royal master greets thee, noble lord,
 And bids thee to the banquet of the queen.
 It waits thy coming—may it please thee, haste.

Haman. I will attend the king;
 Let us be gone.

(Exit *Haman with the chamberlains, except Æratheus, who lingers behind the rest, and remains in the court with Adalia.*)

Æratheus. Pardon, young lord,
 But as I crossed yon court, a gibbet high
 Startled my upward gaze—why stands it there?
 And who the hapless wretch condemned to hang
 On the accursed tree?

Adalia. Thou 'lt know ere long—
 Aye, on the coming morn, before the sun
 Climbs with his flaming steeds you mountain's top,
 Pass but this ebon gate, and thou shalt see
 Upraised in middle air a well known face,
 Grinning defiance with such ghastly smile,
 As felons only wear.

Æratheus. Who may he be—and what his foul offence,
 This miserable wretch, condemned to die
 A death so vile, that not the meanest slave
 But sues to taste it in some other form,
 Less full of bitter, ignominious shame—
 Shame worse to bear than the most cruel pain.

Adalia. 'T is far too good for him, this ingrate Jew,

Who mocking sits at Shushan's stately gate,
Scorning to render honor where 't is due,
And bearding princes with his daring pride.

Æratheus (starts with surprise.)

Mean'st thou that Mordecai, who on this morn
Rode forth in triumph on a princely steed,
In purple clothed, with royal favor crowned,
And with a kingly grace bending his head,
In sign of thanks to the tumultuous crowd,
Who shouted forth their passionate acclaim,
At sight of one so honored by his king?

Adalia. Aye, even him—this morn his sovereign's hand

Crowned him with honors, kings alone should wear ;
But ere another dawn upon his eyes,
That very hand shall sign his final doom,
And send the wretch to meet his just deserts.
But I have said, what should not pass my lips
Till all is done. Thou 'st won me unawares
To speak forbidden words—therefore be cautious,
For this night, at least—to-morrow all will blab.

[*Exit Adalia.*

*Æratheus (solus.) Aye, will they so, weak fool,
But not of Mordecai—not of base wrong,
Thus foully wrought him by false Haman's hand.
The tide will turn and wreck these wicked schemes,
And bring the Jew a freight of golden joys,
Preluded by the glory of this morn.
The king shall know of this—and the fair queen,
Within whose azure veins flows the same blood,
As that which burns, when full of high disdain,
At Haman's pride, his low exacting pride,
On this Egyptian's cheek. I will away
To serve my queen, by all I here have learned,
As best I can.*

[*Exit.*

SCENE VI.—*A banqueting room in the Queen's palace.*
King, Queen, and Haman.

*Ahasuerus. Most noble Haman, crown again thy cup,
And I will pledge thee in this Cyprus wine,*

Whose rich aroma sends forth a perfume,
Worthy the drink of heaven.

(*They raise their cups.*)

And, fairest queen,
By thy sweet leave, we bid thy minstrels wake
Once more their lyres—soft music well beseems
An hour like this; to beauty consecrate,
To woman's wit, and wine's entrancing flow.

Esther. Aye, minstrels, strike—
Pour forth a strain which shall enchant the soul,
Call forth its deep emotions, and awake
Its energies divine.—I love a lay,
Which rouses to high thoughts and noble deeds,
Far more than dying numbers, soft and low,
That lap the listener in a dreaming bliss,
From which to wake is pain.

Ahasuerus. My fairest queen, thou need'st no stirring
 lay
To bring the soft carnation to thy cheek,
And wake the lambent glories of thine eyes.
To day methinks they are surpassing bright—
Yet through the dazzling veil I see, my love,
All is not right within thy gentle breast—
Thy brow is troubled, and thy lustrous eye,
Glances with startled gaze, like the wild fawn's,
That sees the hunter nigh. Speak then, beloved,
And urge thy fond request—thine shall it be,
Though, as I said erewhile, 't is to bestow
One half my kingdom's wealth.

Esther. Not that, my gracious lord!
Thy power, thy wealth, thy greatness be thine own,
I am content with their reflected light.
But for my people, hear me, mighty king!

(*She rises and throws herself at his feet.*)
Protect thy queen! protect her hapless race,
From that proud foe who seeks to shed their blood,
And hunt them from the earth. Extend thine arm
And snatch them from his power. Hear me, I pray,
And we will bless thee both with heart and life,
And call aloud upon our fathers' God,
To shield thee with his love!

Ahasuerus (striving to raise her.)

Arise, my queen! what mean thy plaintive words,
And who are those, who e'en with evil thought
Dare breathe thy hallowed name, or frame one wish
Of aught, save joy and blessing on thy head?

Esther. Nay, let me bend thus humbly at thy feet,
And tell thee all. Perchance when thou hast heard,
Thou 'lt spurn me hence, nor—

Ahasuerus (holding her from him and gazing earnestly upon her.)

What sudden passion moves thee to such speech?
I spurn thee hence! Is not thy smile my life?
That soft imploring eye my guiding star,
Without whose light the glories of my realm,
Were dark and joyless to my aching sight?
And think'st thou aught can chance to change my love,
Or woo me to forget the blessed claim
Thou hast upon my care? I, who have sworn,
To shield thee ever in my inmost heart,
And guard thee fondly as a dearer self?

Esther. Ah, to forego such love!

The thought is bitter—worse—far worse than death.
Yet must I tell the tale, though it should rend
The dearest ties which bind my heart to earth—
Then list, my lord, and know that she thou lovest,
Was once a Jewish maid—

Ahasuerus (starting and intently scanning her features.)

Ha! hear I thee aright? a Jewish maid?
Come let me look upon thy face divine,
And closely scan it with a critic's eye,
To read if this be true. And so it is!
I might have known it by those glorious eyes,
So mutely eloquent, so softly bright,
And by that changeful cheek, and those ripe lips,
And every lineament of beauty rare,
Peculiar to thy race—none boast such charms—
Not e'en the dainty maids of our soft clime
Compare with thine, who breathe the soul of love,
And look the essence of embodied grace—
Think'st thou for this, I 'll spurn my peerless bride?
Nay, nestle in my arms—thy home, thy rest!

(Raising and embracing her.)

Hebrew or Persian thou art dear alike,
And by my crown I swear, no hand shall harm
E'en one of these dark curls, that softly fall
Like evening shadows on thy neck of snow.

Esther (sinks down again, overcome by emotions, on the cushions at his feet.)

Blessings and thanks, my dear and royal lord,
For all thy gracious and enduring love !
Words cannot breathe the feelings of my soul,
And e'en these happy tears but faintly show
The deep emotion of my grateful heart ;
Still may I trespass on thy patient ear,
And plead for those, thy word has doomed to death ?
That word wrung from thee by a traitor base,
Who dares abuse thy unsuspecting love
By artful falsehoods, while he seeks to pour
On a whole race his deep and dark revenge,
Because, forsooth, one man who holds their faith,
Scorns to do homage to his low-born pride !

Ahasuerus (starting up quickly.)

What do I hear ?

Is it the noble Haman thou 'dst impeach ?
And has he urged me to this bloody act,
Only to satisfy his private hate ?

Esther. Aye, even so—I tell no idle tale—
Before him Mordecai refused to bend—
To kiss the earth pressed by his haughty foot—
And to revenge this slight, he won from thee
Permission to unsheathe the murderous sword,
And smite from earth my hunted, hapless race.
Doubt'st thou my words ?—look on that pallid face,

(Pointing to Haman.)

And read therein the lines of conscious guilt !

(*The king turns sternly towards Haman, who during the past scene has remained pale and motionless with terror and dismay.*)

Ahasuerus. Oh, gracious gods ! have I been thus deceived ?
Is this the man, the ingrate vile and base,
Whom I have raised o'er wiser, better men,
Crowned with high honors, loaded with vast wealth,

Within his grasp placed power, and laid myself,
 Aye, e'en my inmost soul, bare to his gaze?—
 And he has used me thus—bounty repaid
 With vile ingratitude—fair truth with lies—
 Honor with treachery base, and in the name
 Of sacred justice has abused my power,
 To make me seem that which I never was—
 A cruel tyrant thirsting for the blood
 Of a poor nation, who beneath my sway
 Lead blameless lives within their quiet homes!
 Gods! for your vengeance to reward such deeds!

(The king greatly agitated rushes through the open door into the garden of the palace.)

(Haman with a look of fear and despair tremblingly approaches the queen, as she reclines upon a couch, and throwing himself at her feet, addresses her in an imploring accent.)

Haman. Mercy! great Queen!
 I do implore thee in the name of Him,
 Thou call'st thy God!

Esther. He is a God of justice, wretched man!
 And his commands writ on eternal stone
 Thou hast defied, and dared to violate,
 When thou didst falsely swear, and rashly seek
 The guiltless blood of those whom He protects.

Haman. Yet hear me, gracious queen!
 Ah, hear me swear—

(The king suddenly re-enters from the garden, and rushes towards him.)

Ahasuerus. Ha! guilty wretch!
 What dost thou there with thy polluted soul,
 So near the couch of innocence and youth?
 This instant is thy last if thou hast dared
 Say aught—

(He draws his sword; the queen throws herself before him.)

Esther. Ah, stay thy hand, my lord!
 Stain not the victor's sword with the foul blood

Of such a cruel heart! He plead for life.
 All guilty as he is, he did but ask
 For mercy at my hands. Return that blade,
 Bright and unsullied to its golden sheath,
 To reap a conquest worthier its renown.

Ahasuerus (putting up the weapon.)
 Thou dost say true, my queen,
 'T would leave a spot upon the shining steel
 Fame never could wash out—mercy he asks,
 And we will give it him. Such as he deals
 To others shall be his. Who waits without?

(Enter chamberlains and attendants.)

Slaves, bind this wretch, and lead him forth to death.

Æratus. Great king, within his palace court there stands
 A gibbet black, and towering high in air,
 Prepared by him for Mordecai the Jew,
 Who on the coming morn was there to die—
 So he decreed—a felon's shameful death.—
 Is it thy pleasure, on that fatal tree
 This man receive the doom, he had prepared
 For one more virtuous, and more pure in heart
 Than he e'er was—though vain the boast he made?

Esther. Oh God ! and was he then so near to death,
 A shameful death, and my unconscious heart,
 Ne'er whispered of the dark impending deed,
 That would again have left me fatherless—
 Without a parting word, a look of love,
 To soothe my bursting heart?

(She sinks down upon her cushion in deep emotion, and remains with her face buried in her hands.)

(Haman, in the mean time falls at the feet of the king, and addresses him in a tone of earnest entreaty.)

Haman. Hear me but once, great king !
 Then banish me to earth's remotest ends,
 But grant me life and—

Ahasuerus (recoiling with a look of horror.)
 Nay, touch me not, base and perfidious man !
 I loathe thee from my soul ! nor will I list
 Thy smooth and artful words, lest they should wake
 A coward mercy in my soul to save.

Thy death is sealed, thy dark career is run ;
 And ere in swift Euphrates' rushing wave
 Yon sun has quenched his beams, thou shalt attain
 That highest eminence thy crimes deserve.
 Slaves bear him hence, and on that gibbet black,
 Prepared for one who shall assume his state,
 See that he meet a traitor's just reward ;
 Peace—peace, I say—go breathe thy fierce despair
 To the hoarse winds which sigh around that tree,
 Where thou ere long shalt hang. My heart is steeled
 At least, for thee it knows no pitying touch,
 I so abhor thy crimes. Bear him away—
 He is so steeped in guilt, the very air
 Seems poisoned by his breath.

[*Exeunt Chamberlains, with the attendants bearing off Haman, who vainly struggles to speak.*]

Ahasuerus (approaching the queen.)

Fairest, revive !

The rank offender's gone, never again
 To weave his subtle snares around our peace—
 Thy nation I 'll protect, and for thy faith,
 I 'll love it for thy sake, and reverence Him,
 Who gave me thee, and still preserves thee safe,
 To bless my life with thy confiding love.
 Look up my queen—why veilest thou that face,
 In whose unclouded beauty I would read
 Approval fair, and soft returning joy,
 O'ercast awhile, but only to beam forth
 More pure, more bright after the passing storm.

Esther (raises her face pale and bathed in tears.)

Pardon my lord

That in this hour of perfect confidence
 'Twixt thee and me, when I have dared to name
 My bondaged race, scorned as it is by all—
 Yet been received into thy noble heart,
 Without reproach, nay, with increase of love—
 Pardon, I say, that in a moment filled
 With bliss like this, I still should cast a thought,
 A shuddering thought, on dangers passed away ;
 My tears will flow when of that fatal tree
 I think or speak, whereon at early dawn

The form of him, to whom my beating heart
 Owes all a daughter's love, was doomed to hang
 In agony and shame. Oh God, I thank thee,
 That thy strong right arm has crushed our foe,
 And spared my father's life.

Ahasuerus. Is it of Mordecai, thou speak'st, fair queen?

And can it be thou art of kin to him,
 That noble Jew who saved my menaced life,
 Art, as thy words imply, in holiest ties
 Bound each to each, bearing the sacred names
 Of father and of child!

Esther. We are so bound, my lord,
 If anxious care, and fond parental love,
 And filial duty, and affection deep
 As ever daughter knew or father felt,
 Can give the right to bear these tender names—
 Nature bestows them not. In infancy
 I was bereft of those who gave me birth,
 And cast upon the care of Mordecai,
 My father's kinsman, and his dearest friend.
 He reared me as a child—and never yet
 Has let me feel that sad and aching void
 Which pains the orphan's heart. His patient hand
 Guided my infant steps with gentle care—
 He shared with loving heart my childish joys,
 Soothed every grief—and in my riper years
 I found in him a true and faithful friend,
 A father fond and kind.

Ahasuerus. And was it he who sent thee here, my queen,
 To charm my sight, to pour upon my soul
 A flood of happiness unknown before,
 Pure as thy radiant self, and unalloyed
 Save by the thought, that death must come to blight
 My perfect bliss.

Esther. Yea, he it was,
 Who, for a purpose linked with holy hopes,
 Urged my unwilling feet to seek these walls—
 I came obedient to his earnest wish,
 And for the sacrifice it cost me then
 I am repaid by thy most precious love,

And by the hope that through my humble means
My people may be spared.

Ahasuerus. Aye, and they shall, all ills I can avert—
But for thyself—how can I e'er repay
A gift so rich. With all my hoarded wealth
I am too poor, to make return that's worthy
The priceless boon—yet I would fain express
My fervent gratitude, as best I may,
For rescued life, and for thy dearer self,
A debt how vast, and therefore here endow
Thy kinsman Mordecai, thy father called,
With all the great estates so late enjoyed
By one unworthy of our princely love.
My signet ring shall also grace his hand,
Token of power derived from me alone,
And henceforth all shall see he is my friend,
Honored as such, and reverenced by all
Within our realm. But yet I would reserve
From out that traitor's spoils one gift for thee;
I ever loved it well—that palace fair,
Wherein he dwelt—and now, my queen, 't is thine.
Thou 'lt find it a sweet spot, with its bright courts,
Its hanging woods, and gardens rich with bloom—
Peopled with classic forms, whose marble breathes,
And gay with thousand founts, whose glittering spray
Falls with a silver sound upon the ear.
Accept it, love, and if there is aught else—

Esther. Nought else of wealth, my lord. I am o'er-
burdened

With thy princely gifts; and while I yield thee thanks
For this, for all, I pray thee grant thy leave
That o'er this new demesne I may appoint
My father Mordecai, to hold in trust,
And there preside, as though he were its lord.

Ahasuerus. Do so my queen—I doubt me not he 'll
prove

A steward faithful to thy every wish.
And now, fair one, how can I serve thee more,
Or better testify my fervent sense
Of all I owe to him, thou call'st thy sire,
And to thyself—the source of all my hopes,
The sweet bestower of my dearest joys.

Esther. Ah, if the emotions of my grateful soul
 Could burning utterance find, thou wouldest not deem
 Me cold as now I seem, insensible,
 And thankless for thy love—thy noble love
 Above all jealous thought, that overlooks
 The trivial circumstance of sect and clime,
 And virtue loves for its pure sake alone.
 For all the favor shown to me, and him,
 Whom as a parent true I must regard,
 I pay thee humblest thanks, sincere and warm—
 Yet one request I still would earnest urge.

Ahasuerus. Name it, my queen,
 I can deny thee nought.

Esther. Then wilt thou not reverse that stern decree
 Sent forth against my race? dooming them all
 To the relentless sword of their fell foe.

Ahasuerus. Alas, my queen, dost thou not know our
 law,
 Fixed, and immutable, permits no change,
 Though on the sentence hang a thousand lives?
 The edict has gone forth, and even I,
 Though to recall it I would pledge my crown,
 Am powerless as thyself. Yet not as dogs,
 Thy countrymen shall die. Write thou my queen,
 Commanding all the Jews throughout our realm
 To rise and arm, not unresisting stand—
 But with the valor of their ancient race
 Meet the advances of their treacherous foe.
 Let this command bear on its front impressed
 Our royal signet, which none dare dispute,
 And all shall yet be well—for through the land
 Powerful are Israel's sons, and few will dare
 Rush forth to meet them, if prepared to strike.
 Therefore be cheered, my love, and let us hope
 This threatening cloud may pass without a storm,
 And leave our heaven serene.

Esther. God grant that hope may prove a prophecy!
 He only is our shield, a present help
 When trouble draweth nigh, a sure defence
 In danger's darkest hour. Trust we in Him,
 Who is Almighty to support and save.

Ahasuerus. I place my trust with thine—and now
 farewell,

I must away to summon Mordecai,
 And hold a conference on affairs of state.
 He dreams not yet how thickly honors bud
 Around his head—again, my queen, farewell :
 May joy, and peace, pure as thy innocence,
 Dwell ever in thy breast. [Exit king.]

SCENE VII.—*In the palace, Esther, Mordecai. The latter richly attired, and wearing on his finger the signet of the king.*

Esther. Triumph, thou say'st, is ours—
 Praise to Jehovah who has led us forth
 From deepest woe—praise for His guardian care,
 Who through all ages still has been our stay,
 Watched o'er the people whom His love redeemed,
 And smote their foes with that outstretched right arm,
 Whose glorious power has oft been visible,
 In mighty works done for his chosen tribes.

Mordecai. Yea, He has fought for us and slain our foes—

Five hundred men within the city's walls,
 Who 'gainst us rose, have fallen beneath our swords,
 Among them lay, gashed with unnumbered wounds,
 Proud Haman's sons, and now their bodies hang
 Beside their sire, upon that shameful tree
 Himself prepared—but not for such an end.

Esther. God's ways are just—his will inscrutable ;
 Low let us bow, and ever dedicate
 To Him alone this glad victorious day.
 In praise, and prayer, and humble thankfulness,
 Let it be kept. On each revolving year,
 We'll hail its glad return with grateful hearts,
 Tell the dark tale of wicked Haman's guilt,
 And teach our children to adore that God
 Who overthrew our foe.

Mordecai. It shall be so, my child !
 In glad memorial we will hold the day,
 And unborn ages shall its wonders sing.
 But chiefly thou swell high the song of praise—
 Thou who didst weep, and cling around my neck,

And earnest pray to turn my purpose firm.
How my heart yearned to grant thy fond desire,
To clasp thee still as I had ever done
Close in my circling arms, and cherish thee,
My tender one, within thy early home,
Where thou didst shed a daily beauty round,
That lent perpetual sunshine to my days.
But fervent faith strengthened my faltering heart,
And nerved it to fulfil its duty stern.
Thou thought'st me harsh—thou couldst not read my soul,
Saw'st not its silent agony, its pangs—
Words may not tell how keen—when forth I thrust
My cherished child to seek a stranger's care.
I will not speak of all that since has chanced,
God only knows what suffering has been mine—
Torturing suspense, and the most cruel fears
That e'er racked human breast. But they are o'er ;
Praise to His mighty name, and thou, dear child,
Met not the fate my trembling heart foretold.
For thou hast proved, all feeble as thou wert,
A rod of power in God's directing hand.
Dost thou not marvel at His wisdom high,
Shown forth in these events, and feel how dim
Thy mortal vision, to His heavenly ken,
How weak thy hand, how low thy lofty state,
Compared with His, who rideth on the winds,
And makes the clouds His ministers of wrath.
Oh, ever thus o'er Israel has He watched,
Since forth from Egypt's soil He led their feet—
Guided their wanderings through the wilderness—
With pitying love forgiving all their sins,
Till safe their footsteps pressed Canaan's shore.
There still He dwelt with them, and made them great,
A mighty people—gave them valiant kings,
A holy priesthood, prophets wise and good.
And when their sins provoked His judgments stern,
Yet were they chastened by forbearing love—
Till black with crime they dared despise His laws,
And set at nought the threatenings of His wrath—
Then fierce His anger burned—a holy flame—
And to avenge His oft insulted laws,

He led them forth a sad repentant band,
Captives and slaves to distant Babylon,
Where still they sing, beside its murmuring streams,
Their exile strains. Yet He forsakes them not—
Though they have deeply sinned, His pitying love,
His tender promises, sustain their souls—
He bares his arm full oft to aid their cause,
And ever cheers them with the precious hope
Of that Messiah, whose victorious arm
Shall lead them forth to conquest and renown.
Praise Him, my daughter, for His glorious works,
Burst forth in songs—exalt His mighty name,
Who gave us life—who formed the solid earth,
Which trembles at His touch—before whose light,
The sun grows dim, and all the heavenly host
Bow down in adoration deep and low.
He reigns o'er earth ! all creatures hymn His praise,
Then let us not be mute—His dear redeemed, |
With whom His covenant stands forever sure—
Whom He protects against the wrath of kings
And calls His own anointed. Praise ye Him,
With heart, and lip, and life ! Praise ye the Lord !
He reigns forever, let the earth rejoice !

[*Exeunt.*



JUDITH.



J U D I T H .

NIGHT fled :

The yellow dawn blushed into day,
Purpling the orient with its dolphin hues,
And shedding o'er Judea's sacred hills,
And fair Bethulia's domes, its golden light,
Till tower, and pinnacle, and arrowy spire,
Of that baleaguered city, round whose walls
The Assyrian lay encamped, gave back its smile,
As joyously and bright, as though sweet peace
Brooded with dove-like wing o'er her fair homes,
And from her temples pealed the gladsome strain
Of the gay marriage hymn.

Queen-like she sat,
That glorious city, on whose swelling hills,
With the wide champaign stretching far around,
And gentle slopes, rich with the clustering vine,
Smiling in quiet beauty at her feet,—
Each wearing as a crown on its green height,
A coronal of trees,—each sending forth
From its deep hidden springs a thousand streams,
To glad the laughing earth, that grateful poured
From its abundant shores a rich return.
Such was it once. But now, as forth she looked,
That mountain queen, o'er vale and sunbright hill,
How sad the view! how changed the lovely scene!
Chariots and horsemen trampled down the field,
Where golden harvests waved,—the falchion flashed,
Where the bright sickle should have reaped the grain,
The war-horse crushed the grape, dying his fetlocks
In the purple juice of the ripe vintage.
And the stormy blast of the wild battle trump

Startled the sylvan echoes, wont to hear,
 To answer only to the silver tones
 Of maidens bright, lingering beside the founts,
 Or the clear carol of the reaper's song,
 The yellow sheaves among.

Assyria's hosts

Darkened the plain, and o'er the hill-side spread
 Their glittering myrmidons, beleaguering close
 Bethulia's walls, and turning from their course
 The streams, that poured their treasures in her lap.
 Till now, within her streets, sad sights were seen,
 And sounds of woe smote the still morning air ;
 For by her gates, and in the marble courts
 Of her fair palaces the aged lay,—
 Bold manhood in its prime, and budding youth,
 And tender infancy,—and woman too,
 She of brief years, and she whose matron arms
 Clasped with undying love her suffering babe,
 And wept its pangs, all reckless of her own.
 There, there they lay, the fair, the beautiful,
 Wisdom, and pride, and power,—cast prostrate down,
 In the strong agony of burning thirst,—
 Calling in vain for water—for one drop,
 One crystal drop of that pure element,
 God in his bounty has vouchsafed to all,
 Free as the light of heaven.

In vain ! in vain !

The burning sky withholds its treasured store
 Of grateful moisture,—not a fleecy cloud
 Floats o'er its blue expanse, blest harbinger
 Of joy. No dew, no rain, no welcome shade,
 In that hot atmosphere, to dim the blaze
 Of the bright sun, that with the heat intense
 Of his fierce beams, their cruel sufferings mocked.
 They were forsaken by their fathers' God,—
 By him, whom oft their wanderings had provoked,
 Whose altars dedicate to one alone
 They had profaned with dark idolatry,
 And rites impure. For this, then, they must die ;
 For this must perish by the spoiler's hand,
 Crying in vain for aid.

Not so ! not so !

For mercy is an attribute divine,
 Not less than sterner justice, and it raised
 A champion up, to save them in this hour
 Of peril sore, and utter hopelessness.
 A champion fair,—one, in whose woman's heart
 Lay buried deep fond hopes, and perished joys,
 And tender sympathies, that erst had lent
 Their golden lustre to her life's young morn,
 Till on the clear horizon of her love,
 Thick clouds arose,—and he, the chosen one,
 To whom with sacred vow her maiden troth
 Had at the marriage altar plighted been,
 Was smitten even to death. The grave received him,
 And its portals dark closed o'er her garnered bliss,
 Shrining it deep, where his dear ashes slept,
 Never again to wake, till the cold earth
 Should yield its hoarded trust, and day eternal
 On the sleeper dawn.

Then o'er that head,

Which still its crown of youth wore with bright grace,
 Fair Judith ashes strewed, and cast aside
 The richly flowing robes of happier days,
 Girding her faultless form with sackcloth coarse,
 Deep sorrow's garb, and dwelling all apart,
 Widowed in soul, and lone, and desolate,
 Communing ever with the silent dead,
 Through those mute objects in her once glad home,
 To which were linked delicious memories
 Of the happy past,—food for perpetual grief.
 Yet still within her heart one feeling lived,—
 One deep absorbing passion, that survived
 The wreck of all beside,—and this it was,
 This love of country, that undying flame,
 Which to the perils that her land beset
 Aroused her soul, and woke its sympathies.
 For though within her home luxurious ease
 And rich abundance dwelt, which still defied
 Want's iron grasp, yet when upon her ear
 The bitter cry of man's stern agony,
 And woman's wail, and helpless childhood's plaint,
 Smote like a funeral knell, she quick arose,—
 Her selfish griefs forgot, and looked abroad,

And saw Assyria's hosts bristling the plain
With terrible array. Then she a purpose formed,
Desperate and rash, breathed only to His ear
Whose aid she sought,—whose only could avail,—
And forth she issued 'mong the smitten throng,
A holy beauty seated on her brow,
And with the silver tones of her clear voice,
To hearts desponding, words of comfort spoke,—
Bidding them trust in that Almighty arm,
Which oft, in soror straits, their fathers saved,
And them had led, an exiled, captive band,
Back to Judea's soil,—back to the temples
Where their choral hymns again arose,
In glad triumphant strains to Israel's God,
Their watchful guide, whose eye no slumber knows.
Still, in the hollow of his mighty hand,
Safe would he hold the people of his love ;
Those who bowed down to him the willing knee,
And offered at his shrine the incense sweet
Of pure and humble hearts.

She would go forth,
She in her feebleness, mid yon proud host,
And dare a desperate deed, which none might know,
Save him who read the secrets of all hearts,
Till it had brought destruction on the foe,
And for her people glad deliverance wrought.
None questioned of her act, no one gainsaid
The purpose she declared, but to her wisdom
Bowed the hoary head, and to her beauty
Many a youthful heart in homage bent.
So when the parting rays of the glad sun
Lingered on tree and stream, and looked their last
On desolate Bethulia, she arose,
Merari's daughter, and aside she cast
Her robes of mourning, and herself arrayed
In garments rich, such as *his* eye had loved;
For whom she wept,—delicious ointments used,
And mid the tresses of her shining hair
Strewed orient gems, and decked her polished arms,
And swan-like neck, with costly chains of gold,—
And on her small white feet bright sandals laced,
That sparkled as she went, with the rich light

Of the rare onyx, and the diamond's blaze.
 Thus through the gates, while silent crowds stood by,
 She in her beauty passed,—a woman's softness
 In her brow enthroned, but in her heart
 A purpose deep, and stern, and terrible,
 Too terrible for words !

One followed her,

Her infancy's fond nurse, her childhood's stay,
 The faithful handmaid of her riper years,
 She who had decked her for the bridal hour,
 And whose sad eyes had seen the marriage crown
 Fade from her brow—its clustered flowers as fair,
 And, aye, as frail as her brief wedded bliss.
 Viands she bore, dried figs, and wine, and oil,
 And bread of finest flour,—small store of each,
 That nought unholy might their lips profane,
 Nought that their law forbade, should they partake
 With yon rude wassailers their dainty fare.
 The last low word was spoke, the last look given,
 And then Bethulia's gates closed on the steps
 Of that high-hearted one, and she was barred,
 She and that faithful follower, from the home,
 The mountain home, of her fair infancy,
 To wander lone, where snares beset her steps,
 God, and her innocence, her only guard.
 What strange emotions gathered round her heart,
 As slow she trod that downward, sloping path,
 To the green vale, which oft, in happier days,
 Her feet had traced with gay and lightsome bound ;
 How fondly o'er each dear familiar spot
 Her sad eye lingered, while remembered joys
 Rushed willing o'er her soul. That climbing vine,
 Beneath its woven arch her ear had drank
 The first fond words of love,—and in the shade
 Of those wild dates, grouped on the green hill side,
 She oft had sat, in childhood's careless day,
 One of a happy band, weaving bright wreaths,
 Till twilight's gathered shadows veiled the sky,
 And warned her home.

A moment to such thought,

And then the softness clinging to her soul
 She cast afar, and nerved it with deep prayer

To her stern purpose,—resolute to die,
If so her God decreed, yet firmly fixed
To dare extremest peril in the cause
Of that dear land she loved.—Thus firm in heart,
She onward moved in queenly beauty bright,
Threading the winding path o'er the soft vale,
With stately step and brow serenely fair,
As the clear moon, when o'er the mountain tops
She sheds her light, treading the pathless depths
Of the blue heavens, in majesty unblenched.
But ere her step had measured half the breadth
Of the green vale, the first watch of the foe
Met her with challenge stern, demanding brief
Her errand and her name.

With wary word

She artfully replied,—feigning she fled
Forth from the Hebrew, to the safer charge
Of their great captain, Holofernes brave,
To whom she craved quick conduct, having that
Which nearly touched his safety to reveal.
They marvelled much, those soldiers stern and rude,
At her bright charms, her grace of air and mien,
And instant yielded to her earnest wish,—
With escort safe, and reverence due her sex,
Bringing her straight to their great leader's tent,
Whose ear, e'en now, had caught the tidings strange,
Of the fair Hebrew, that his presence sought.
Quick he arose from the luxurious couch,
Whereon he lay, richly o'ercanopied
By Tyrian purple, wrought with gems and gold ;
And forth he came, with lamps of silver,
Fed with perfumed oil, before him borne
By Ethiop slaves, and followed by a train
As gaily clad as e'er a monarch served.
But when his eyes fell on that peerless face,
That matchless form, so gorgeously arrayed
In gemmed and broidered robes, pride left his brow
Sternness his warrior's heart, which sank subdued
Before the might of her rare loveliness,
And to Merari's daughter low he bowed,
E'en now as slave in soul.

With heart elate,
 She marked her triumph ; but no word, no look,
 Betrayed her joy,—her coil around him cast,
 She was content to wait the final hour
 For the fulfilment of her purpose dread.
 And to this end she taught her lips deceit,
 Made her dark eyes, her kindling cheek discourse,
 A language all unsanctioned by her heart ;
 Feigned to be won by his soft speech, and glance,—
 And to have sought him, that she might betray
 Her people to his sword.

Thus, day by day,
 She sojourned in the camp of those idolaters,
 Sharing her tent with her attendant lone,
 And at each evening's fall, slow passing forth,
 Unquestioned to the vale whither she went,
 In its clear founts to bathe, breathe its pure air,
 And, mid the quiet of its leafy shades,
 Ask of her God his guidance and support,
 In this dark hour of trial to her soul.
 The fourth day came,—and in the gorgeous tent
 Of proud Assyria's chief, a banquet
 Had been held,—but now 't was o'er,—all hushed,—
 The revellers departed,—and alone,
 Her radiant form in beauty's bravery decked,
 And half reclining on the soft rich skins
 Of the wild panther and the spotted pard,
 Fair Judith sat, with Holofernes brave,—
 On her bright lip were smiles, but in her heart
 Sickening disgust, and that dull leaden weight,
 Which loads the shrinking soul, in the near view
 Of a dread task, to which the hand is doomed.
 She had refused to banquet at his board,
 But oft her hand his goblet crowned with wine,
 And her heart joyed at each insidious drop
 The warrior quaffed.

But her chaste ear recoiled
 From his bold words,—and from his lawless glance
 Her modest eye shrank with instinctive shame.
 It almost seemed like treachery to the dead
 Thus to endure his gross, licentious gaze,
 Or to permit e'en for a transient space

The injurious thought, that she, whose marriage vow
Not death itself might cancel, e'er would yield
To living one the joyless, widowed form,
The heart bereaved and sad, which still she held
Sacred, and consecrate to him alone,
Whom she had seen in earth's green bosom laid.
And, as the soft light from the swaying lamps
Fell on the rounded cheek, its paleness told
Of fearful thoughts, emotions strong and deep,
Which in her soul were hid,—yet all unheeded
In this hour of doom, its selfish fears,—
Its hallowed memories, deep and treasured love,
Aye, e'en its woman's softness, woman's shame,
In the one holy, one ennobling hope,
To free her suffering country from the thrall
Of foreign foes,—to purge its sacred soil
From pagan taint,—to see again its homes
Smiling and joyful, and its temples thronged
With grateful worshippers, who came to raise
With glad accord their songs of joy, and love,
To Israel's guardian God.

At length he slept,—

That valiant warrior, terrible in arms,—
Subdued by wine, and by a woman's smile,
He fell recumbent on his downy couch,
Nor knew that death was near. Then she arose,
Bethulia's dying ones before her eyes,
Their groans of anguish ringing in her ears,
And o'er him stood,—breathed one brief prayer to
heaven,
Then, ere a timid fear, a softening thought,
Stole o'er her soul, she grasped the falchion bright,
That by his pillow hung, and smote his neck,—
A deadly blow, with her frail woman's hand,—
And down it rolled, that bleeding, ghastly head,
Staining the rich embroidery of her robes,
With spouting gore! Quick from the couch
She tore its canopy of gem-wrought silk,
And wrapped that fearful thing in its bright folds,
Summoned her maid, and gave it to her charge,
Then issued forth, as ever was her wont
At that still hour, to fair Bethulia's vale.

But now she paused not by its flashing founts,
 Nor lingered mid its shades,—but with fleet foot,
 Climbed the steep mountain path, and called afar
 To the worn watchman at the guarded gates,
 To haste and open,—for the Lord had bared
 His strong right arm, and smote their cruel foe.
 Wondering they heard, yet questioned not, nor paused,
 But the huge gates unbarred, and opened wide,
 And on the waning watch-fires fuel cast
 To feed the flames, whose bright and arrowy tongues
 Leaped fiercely up, as if to seize their prey.
 Then through she passed,—and pausing in the gleam
 Of the red light, took from her maiden's hand
 That silent witness of the fearful deed,
 Herself had wrought,—shook out the gorgeous folds
 Of the rich silk, tissued with orient gems,
 That flashed resplendent in the fitful blaze
 Of the bright fire,—and then, with outstretched hand,
 Essayed to grasp, by its long golden hair,
 That ghastly head.

Yet woman still she was,
 And with instinctive dread, her trembling touch
 Shrank from the contact,—deathly grew her cheek,
 And with emotion strong, quivered her lip.
 But for an instant swayed she to that mood,—
 And then, with triumph beaming on her brow,
 And songs of gladness bursting from her tongue,
 She, in the gory locks of that dread thing
 Her delicate fingers twined, and held it up
 To the astonished view of the mute crowd,—
 “Behold,” she cried, “fierce Holofernes’ head!
 The valiant captain of Assyria’s host,
 Slain by a woman’s hand! Come and adore,
 For God this deed hath done. His hand hath wrought
 By a weak instrument a mighty end!
 To His great name give thanks,—to His alone!
 The High and Holy One, who Israel guards,—
 In whom is all our strength!”

Then rose a shout
 Of mingled joy and praise,—a mighty shout!
 Thousands of voices blending into one,
 In that long, loud acclaim; and prone on earth,

The multitude in their deep gladness fell,
 Humbly adoring that preserving hand,
 Which them sustained, and as a feeble reed
 Before the whirlwind's blast, had crushed the arm
 Of their relentless foe.—Nor was *she* all forgot,
 In these outpourings of their thankful hearts,—
She, who had perilled life,—aye, more than life,—
 Her chaste unspotted name, that priceless gem,—
 Renounced the gentle bearing of her sex,—
 Cast off the shroud of grief, within whose folds
 Were hoarded precious memories of the dead,—
 And issued forth from her lone widowed bower,
 To strike for God and her insulted land
 A deadly blow.

With morning's earliest dawn,
 Throughout the Assyrian camp, the deed was known ;
 And then a cry of shame, and grief, and fear,
 Burst from that mighty host,—shame, to be foiled
 By a weak woman's arts,—and grief, that thus
 Their valiant one should fall,—their pride, their
 strength,—

Inglorious thus, by a false Hebrew's hand,—
 And fear, pale fear, for lo, upon the hills
 Thousands were seen,—thousands in armor bright,
 The sons of Israel, from their mountain holds
 Outpouring, to avenge the heaped up wrongs,
 Cast by the leader of that Pagan host
 O'er fair Judea's land. On, on they came,
 Rushing like mountain torrents to the plain,
 Impetuous, swift, with fierce destruction armed,—
 And panic-struck, aghast, the broken ranks
 Of the Assyrian fled, nor backward looked,
 Though Carnage followed on her reeking car,
 Marking their flight with blood, till they had passed
 The borders of Damascus, distant far,
 Where stayed their wearied steps.

Then, with glad shouts,
 The Hebrews turned to their freed homes again,
 And as with buoyant hearts they climbed the sides
 Of fair Bethulia's mount, a maiden train,
 Bearing green boughs, and crowned with garlands gay,
 Came, with the stately dance and measured song,

To hail their safe return. Bright at their head,
 Fair Judith led their steps, with winning grace,
 She, their deliverer named, their crown of joy,
 The glory and rejoicing of their land !
 Her lofty brow, with the green olive twined,
 And her dark eye, flashing with triumph proud,
 As thus she poured her high, victorious song,
 And led with graceful feet the sacred dance.

Break forth into praises ! with timbrel and harp,
 Exalt ye the name of your Saviour and God ;
 Almighty, all-glorious, omniscient, and wise,
 Who spake, and the heathen were scattered abroad !

His mandate went forth, and the valiant one fell,—
 The terror of Judah, the scourge of her race ;
 Not by giant hands smitten, she sank on the earth,
 Weak weapons subdued him,—a woman's fair face !

Jehovah decreed it.—He bade her go forth,
 Mid the chariots and horsemen that covered the plain ;
 Her trust in that arm, which is mighty to save,
 In that strength, which each wile of the foe could
 make vain.

She went forth undaunted,—her buckler and shield,
 Strong faith in the Lord ; and her weapons of might,
 A bright gem and a smile,—they flashed on his eyes,
 And the mighty one sank, overpowered by their light.

The wine cup stood by him,—the falchion hung near,
 He slept,—and the hand, which love's soft wreaths
 had wove
 To twine round the brow of the lost and the wept,
 Sternly grasped the keen blade, and the warrior's neck
 clove !

The Persian affrighted beheld the bold deed,
 And Media quaked to its furthermost sea,
 But the voice of her people alone smote her ear,
 As gladly they shouted the song of the free !

Break forth into praises ! exalt ye his name,
Who scatters your foes like the dust of the plain ;
He the horseman hath vanquished, the chariots o'er-
thrown,—
By the hand of the weak hath the mighty one slain !

With the lute and the timbrel, the tabret and harp,
With the music of song, and the heart's fervent praise,
With the dance of glad triumph,—the garments of joy,
Show forth your thanksgiving,—deep notes of love
raise !

Exalt him ! exalt him ! the earth is his own,
The star-spangled heavens his wondrous works show,
To him, who first formed us, whose care still preserves,
Let our thanks and our praises unceasingly flow.







